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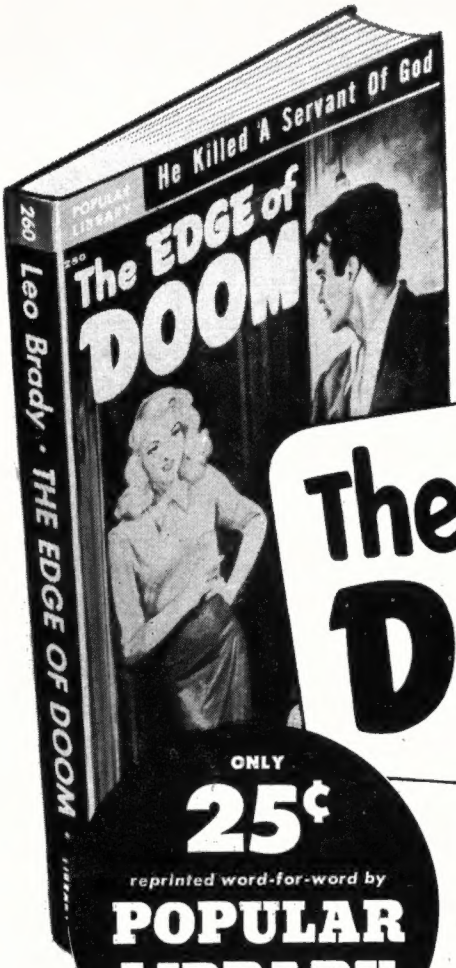

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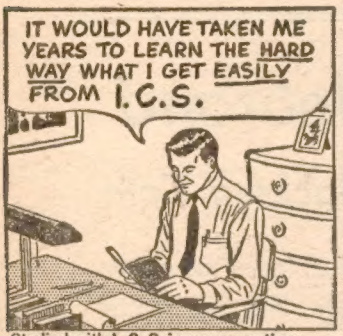

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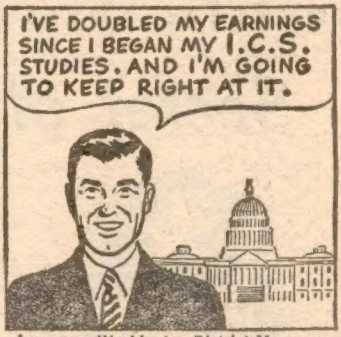

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 40, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER, 1950

COMPLETE NOVEL

Secret of the Saddlebrand

By Jackson Cole

When stock thief "Hammerhead" Robles and a crew of killers stalk Victoria town, the call sounds for rapid Ranger law—and Jim Hatfield battles to unearth the grim mystery of a troubled range! 11

SHORT STORIES

TWO-GUN TERROR.....by Robert J. Hogan 69
No man knew whether Scotty was a gun hand till the Wild Bunch cut loose

TICKET TO BOOTHILL.....by T. W. Ford 77
"Careful Sam" believed in being cautious—right up until showdown time

NO LEAD PILLS FOR PLOWMEN.....by J. Edward Leithead 83
Old Rye Hardin atoned for his past in a way that even he didn't suspect

FEATURES

THE FRONTIER POST.....by Captain Starr 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

KNIGHT OF THE MESAS.....by Harold Preece 64
The true story of Ranger Ira Aten, who fought desperadoes of the Border!

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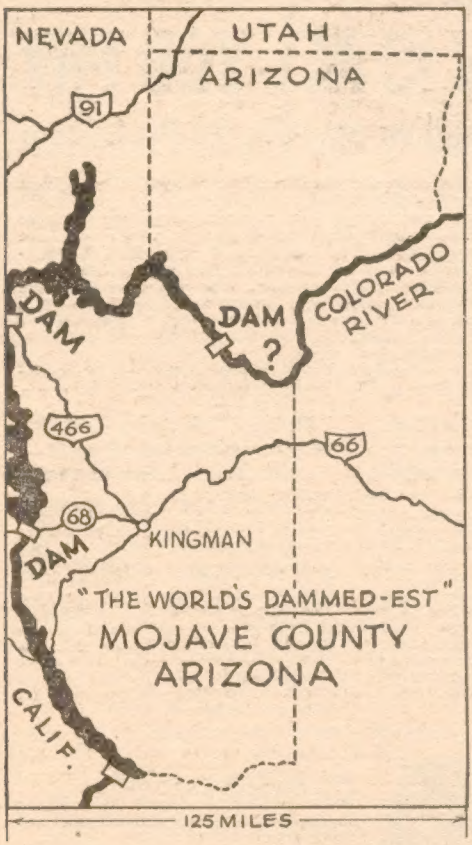
HIYA, gals and galluses! Ranchers, cowboys, Injuns and miners who live in wild, thinly-settled northwestern Arizona, woke up the other morning to discover that they were about the seagoingest desert folks from Texas west—or anywhere else.

It came about with the completion of Davis Dam on the Colorado River, and the rapid



forming of a 50-mile long lake above it. It made the lower half of Mojave County almost an island.

This strange County of Mojave, which forms the upper, left-hand corner of the map of Arizona, has hardly any population. But it has plenty of elbow-room, with a land area larger than the combined States of Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Man-Made Lakes

So now a chain of three huge man-made lakes bound this big bailiwick on the west. Mead, Davis and Havasu are the names of these deep, blue-water inland seas, backed up by Hoover, Davis and Parkers Dams. (Davis Dam, the one just finished, lies directly west of Kingman, the county seat, as shown on the accompanying map). Hoover (Boulder) Dam is above, Parker Dam below.

But that isn't all. A fourth dam is planned above the three already built, at a site known as Marble Canyon, marked (Dam?) on our map.

Marble Canyon Dam will be a settling basin, to hold the thousands of tons of silt the river now carries anually into Lake Mead.

Land of Contrasts

Then Arizona, the land of contrasts, will have another amazing claim. It will have more lakeshore—somewhere between 300 and 500 miles—than any of the Great Lakes States except Michigan!

As for Mojave County, which was a mighty unusual outland even before all this happened, when it starts looking around for an advertising slogan, the fittenest one will be "the dammed-est place in the world." Take careful notice of the spelling, and you'll see that it isn't just cuss-talk.

I've remarked that Mojave County isn't over-populated. Just to give you an idea, the county seat, Kingman, which is the only town of any size at all, isn't even incorporated! It straddles U.S. cross-country High-

way 66, and the Santa Fe railroad, and is 100 miles southwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, by Highway 466.

The only paved highways in the huge county are those shown on our map. You'll also see that the Colorado River cuts Mojave County in half. There's no route between the north and south portions.

The Arizona Strip

There's no bridge or other way to cross the river, unless you count Pierce Ferry, in the vicinity of Marble Canyon. It's the old pioneer crossing, but of no practical use now because it's not on any route of travel.

So to get from southern Mojave County, to the northern part which is known as "the Arizona Strip," you have to go around through Nevada, 115 miles.

There's no doubt about it, this creates difficulties in the administration of county affairs. A horse thief, for instance, could laugh and jeer at the sheriff, up where the river bisects the county, and the sheriff would be sort of helpless to do anything about it—unless he had a helicopter handy. Maybe he could borrow one from the Air Force base at Kingman.

With 300,000 acres of grazing land, Mojave County has large cattle ranches and some have gone into the dude-ranching sideline, for it is an attractive region of colorful desert ranges, with a lot of wild game, including pronghorn antelope.

Hualpais Indians

Northeast of Kingman is the Hualpai Indian Reservation, nearly one million acres occupied by 350 Hualpais. There are several other smaller reservations in the county and by way of further tourist attractions there are two genuine ghost towns—White Hills and Chloride.

Both of these are connected by short side roads to Highway 93, on the stretch between Kingman and Hoover Dam.

White Hills, a clutter of weathered shacks, produced $11,000,000 in gold and silver during a short boom following the discovery strike in 1891.

Chloride's diggings are reviving, so about 100 persons live there, though it had a population of 2000 in boomtimes. Both these old mining camps expect a revival, with copper,

[*Turn page*]

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but can't get started

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Open Season for Trout

But that isn't all. Some of the best trout fishing in the United States is along the short stretch of flowing water between Hoover and Davis Dams. Utah rainbows, big ones. Open season the year around.

Sport resorts are springing up, with boating facilities ranging from rowboats to yacht-sized power cruisers. Catering to visiting anglers is getting to be big business in Mojaveland.

The enormous hydro-electric power output from the dams has vitalized the Southwest's industry. Water diverted in giant pipelines supplies faraway places. Without it, Los Angeles would perish, and vast irrigated areas would become desert, as they once were.

The outcome of the present California-Arizona water and power feud will decide the future course of such expansion. But Mojave County, being richer in minerals than in farmland, isn't expected to benefit, whatever happens. Except that river power will operate a smelter to be built at Las Vegas, making it possible to mine and process on a paying basis great bodies of ore as yet untouched.

All of which is a part of the mining revival prospect, particularly in tungsten, manganese, zinc and other metals that cannot be recovered by simple free-milling processes used in gold and silver mining.

The Kaibab Forest

Kingman, the county seat and natural hub, lies at 3336 feet elevation, 270 miles from Phoenix and about 360 miles from Los Angeles by fast highways. The clear, dry, invigorating climate is inviting at almost any time of year except in hot midsummer.

But the Kaibab Forest, in the whacked-off northern half of Mojave County, is ideal summer vacation land—a pine-clad plateau rising to an elevation of a mile and more, forming the north rim of Grand Canyon and reaching almost to Zion National Park in southern Utah.

When Marble Canyon Dam is built, it will

provide a crossing that will knit the county together. Imagination alone can tell what the ultimate development will be.

Mojave County, unique in so many ways, has still another distinction. What other county in U.S.A., is bounded by three states? Utah hugs its north boundary. On the west, where Nevada ends in a nibbled pie-shaped wedge, that state and California make the watery border. The only bridges, except roadways over the three finished dams, are at Topock, near Needles, where the Santa Fe and Highway 66 cross the narrow upper neck of Lake Havasu.

When the government started the dam-building program, shrewd and far-seeing men wagged their heads and gloomily prophesied that there'd be a surplus of power that would go unused and wasted.

Here's what they say now:

"The power shortage is critical. It will remain critical for several years to come."

From Dams to Rams

So much for Mojave County, "the Dammed-est Place in the World." Let's turn now from dams to rams—and ewes. Even if you're not specially interested in sheep-raising, you'd like to know why lamb chops and dress-up pants are so expensive these days.

At the start of World War II, our ranges from Texas west held 56 million sheep. Last season, the tally was 31 million. Wool production dropped from 454 million pounds to about 250 million pounds.

So here is the story of our Vanished Sheep, proving that wise men can guess wrong in a flock of other ways besides the demand for electricity.

It all started when we cut the wool import tariff 25 percent during the war. The market became glutted with Australian wool at prices lower than American growers could compete with.

So they cut their herds.

Now Australian wool prices are soaring, because that country was hit by a drought that caused the loss of 25 million head of sheep. With our domestic supply reduced almost by half, wool for textiles is scarce. And the most expensive meat in the markets is mutton.

Prices are expected to remain up until our western sheep ranges breed up and get back into pre-war production. In the meantime,

(Continued on page 93)

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- ☐ THE GIRL IN THE SPIKE-HEELED SHOES by Martin Yoseloff
- ☐ MURDER AT MIDNIGHT by Richard Sale
- ☐ SOMEWHERE IN THIS HOUSE by Rufus King
- ☐ THE NINE WAXED FACES by Francis Beeding
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A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

When stock thief "Hammerhead" Robles and a killer crew stalk Victoria town, the call sounds for some swift Texas Ranger Justice!

SECRET of the SADDLEBRAND

CHAPTER I

Decoyed

OLD MAN Terwilliger dismounted, a bit creakily, and dropped his brown gelding's reins. From the height where he stood he could see over the mile-wide valley of the Guadeloupe River. Cattle grazed on spacious salt meadows and a sea breeze stole in off the Gulf, thirty miles eastward, mingling with the fragrance of the range.

It was a pleasant old land, this section of southeast Texas, and Old Man Terwilliger loved it. Save for periods in his youth when he had fought under Sam Houston for the independence of Texas, and for the United

Jim Hatfield and Buck Robertson Battle to

States under General Zachary Taylor, he had seldom strayed far from home. It was Old Man Terwilliger's country and he liked it the way he had always known it. There were well-forested areas with a virgin growth of pecans, huge oaks and cypresses, some canopied with wild grapevines and festooned with solemn Spanish moss.

He, too, was ancient, three-quarters of a century of age, but still straight and lean, and with an eagle look. Myriad wrinkles radiated from his shrewd, keen eyes, and the teeth he had left could chew a bear fillet or a beefsteak. Yet, though he had lived outdoors all his life, raising cattle and mustangs, fighting Indians and hunting, he was an artist. His hands showed it. He was, in fact, a decidedly skilled artisan, proof of which was the ornate saddle on his horse, his own handiwork of exquisitely carved leather, trimmed with heavy beaten silver mountings.

A master craftsman had conceived and executed the designs on that saddle, just one example of Terwilliger's genius. His son's spacious ranch, the Saddlebrand, a few miles away, was filled with silver bits, leather-work, bracelets, and other beautiful things to which the old man had turned his hand. So were neighboring homes, such as those of Felipe Gasca and Bill Lane, who owned the Circle L.

Terwilliger knew how welcome he always was at the Saddlebrand or anywhere else he chose to light but the old Texan, impatient of restraint, preferred to be alone much of the time. So he had built himself a cabin here on the heights years ago, and had turned over the range and the main house to his son, Wallace, lock, stock, and barrel.

OLD MAN Terwilliger cocked his head as he stood there, listening. During his long lifetime many guns had gone off close to his ears, but now those ears were not what they had been—though he hated to admit it. He sniffed the air, and abruptly plunged into a thicket.

A towering red rock formation loomed before him, split by erosion and water action centuries ago. He squeezed between the two rough walls and quickly was out of sight. When he emerged he was carrying something which he kept hidden, holding it against his shirt.

As he reappeared, a big, broad man with a mashed nose and cauliflower ears stepped out and confronted him. The big man held a carbine at the ready, finger to the trigger. Pale-blue eyes riveted on the old man who stopped short and returned the stare.

"Why, howdy, Hammerhead," drawled old Terwilliger.

"Hammerhead Frank" Robles was not a prepossessing figure to greet casually. It was plain, from his sharklike figure and the fishily pale skin beneath the untidy growth of black whiskers—the kind of skin which tans little even under a hot sun—how he had come by his nickname. He resembled the killer shark—and had about as much conscience.

"Just keep standin', yuh old he-goat," he growled. "If yuh try for that peashooter I'll sieve yuh."

"Huh!" Old Man Terwilliger was not afraid. He was a veteran of too many encounters, both in war and peace, to quail before a man who was rated an outlaw, a thief, and perhaps worse. Cowardice was not in him, but he knew the advisability of standing quiet under the the guns of such a savage as Hammerhead Robles.

From his left the bushes rustled and a third man joined the party. He was tall and thin, with intensely black eyes sunk deep in his cadaverous face. His skin was a dark olive, and his hair blue-black. A pistol rode in his holster, while cased at his other hip was a long stiletto with a needle point. His bony body was in cowboy rig which did not seem to fit him, but he was unaccustomed to it, being new to Texas—"Stiletto Joe" Battolini, a Sicilian, a fugitive from justice in Italy.

Robles gave him a brief nod without taking his eyes off Terwilliger.

"Draw his fang, Joe," ordered Hammerhead. "Watch him! He's still quick, even if he is fallin' to pieces . . . This is shore it, all right! See what he's holdin'!" In

Unearth the Mystery of a Troubled Range!

Robles' voice was a triumphant note.

Battolini slipped up and snatched the pistol from Terwilliger's belt. He gave a sharp, shrill cry.

"Nappy! Nappy! Come queeckly! We have eet!"

From old Terwilliger's right strolled a short, stoutish man in blue trousers, conservative shirt, and dark hat. On his black boots were small spurs, and in one chubby hand he carried a quirt. At first glance it might have been thought that this man—Napier Snodgrass—was an inocuous individual, but closer examination would have shown that his all but lipless mouth was cruel, his eyes venomous. Under his thin hair was a busy, evil brain.

JIM HATFIELD

Ten years older than Hammerhead and Battolini, he had constituted himself their master, and to him they had sworn allegiance. His paunch protruded as he stepped past Battolini on his short, heavy legs to seize what Terwilliger was holding.

He turned it rapidly, examining it with greedy eyes, his tongue darting in and out in his excitement. He didn't look like Napoleon then, and he had acquired his nickname, "Nappy", not from a shortening of his own name, "Napier", but from a fancied resemblance to the Little Corporal. He was himself the most assured of that.

"Watch him, boys!" he snapped. "Gun him if he moves." He hurried into the crevice.

Old Man Terwilliger kept a straight face until Snodgrass hastily returned, flushed and puffing.

"Drat it!" he cried. "This isn't it at all!"

HAMMERHEAD ROBLES, slouched in his range leather, straightened up, giving his tall Stetson a yank. A stream of profanity issued from his twisted mouth.

"Stop that!" commanded Snodgrass. "You know how I hate that kind of language!"

Stiletto Joe, keeping in mind his chief's idiosyncrasies, did not swear, but he shivered, violently.

"It must be—it must be, Signor Nappy!" he protested.

"We've follered him for days!" snarled Robles, taking a step toward Terwilliger. "I was shore he'd led us in this time."

Seeing their confusion, hearing their voluble disappointment, Old Man Terwilliger could not longer contain himself. He began to laugh, slapping his long shank resoundingly. He danced up and down in his glee at their discomfiture, and tears of merriment rolled from his eyes. They watched him scowlingly, and when he could speak, the old fellow told them off.

"Mebbe I'm gettin' a mite deaf, gents, but I can still smell, and I can sniff rats! You ain't the first who's tried to creep up on me. This here is just a decoy—comes in handy when some fool trails me."

"Torture heem—make heem tell!" screamed Stiletto Joe, all but choking in his flaming fury.

Hammerhead Robles' teeth ground and patches of crimson showed in his fishy cheeks.

Snodgrass was frothing at the mouth and hurled what he had taken from Terwilliger at the old man who nimbly dodged the missile.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" wailed Snodgrass.

"He's tricked us! He'll expose us now and will never go near the place we want while we're around." He was stirred to the depths.

"We got to kill the old rascal, Nappy," growled Robles. "I savvy how stubborn he is. He won't tell us nothin' not even if yuh work over him the way the Apaches do it." He shook his head despairingly.

"That's one of the few words of truth yuh ever spoke, my boy," chortled Old Man Terwilliger. "Better call off yore party and turn up the cards while there's time."

Snodgrass glowered at the ancient Texan. "We might try hot knife points on

Hatfield fired, and the outlaw pursuing Buck sagged in his saddle and crashed (CHAP. XIII)

him," he said thoughtfully. "Still, the best thing would be to get rid of him and start over. What the father knows, the son must know, too. We have that hope."

Terwilliger fully realized then, just how vicious and deadly this trio was. Others who had sought his secret had run for it when he had fooled them, nonplussed, and only been anxious to get away. This Snodgrass was different. But the old man was not the sort to die without make a fight, and a good one.

Hammerhead Robles still had his short-barreled rifle leveled, but he also had a pearl-handled six-shooter in the holster at his hip. As he turned his head to answer Snodgrass, old Terwilliger made a grab at the holstered weapon. He got it and whirled, flinging up the Colt.

Only Battolini's speed saved at least one of the attackers from being shot. The Italian was close behind Terwilliger, and his bony brown hand blurred as he pulled his stiletto and plunged it into Terwilliger's back ribs.

Flexing back, the driving knife point slashing his vitals, the old man fired his last shot. But his spasmodic jerk had elevated the muzzle and the slug shrieked over Hammerhead Robles' head. A breath later the Texan shuddered as he was hit by a ball from the French derringer

brought into play by Napier Snodgrass.

Old Man Terwilliger slowly crumpled, sinking to the ground. He was dying.

"Tch-tch-tch!" Snodgrass was irritated.

"We'll win out, Chief!" cried Robles. "We'll go for his son now and have it in no time at all."

"Rubbish!" Snodgrass coldly faced fact. "This means a long campaign, Let's hope the old fool *did* confide in his son. But even when we do locate it, there will be hard work ahead of us to seize and hold it . . . Brush up around here, boys, and leave no sign. Dump the carcass down near the river."

Snodgrass frowned, folding his dumpy arms and resting them on his paunch as he turned, massive head sunk, and marched off.

CHAPTER II

The Invaders

"DUKE" LAUGHLIN stopped his long-legged buckskin in the east yard at the Saddlebrand, and slid easily from his high-pronged saddle.

It was inevitable that such a man as Boyce Laughlin, foreman of the big ranch, should have been given such a high-sounding nickname as he bore, because of his very appearance. He was a handsome young fellow, lean and tall and powerful, with frank brown eyes that were laughing and gay, crisp chestnut hair, and a clipped mustache to match.

He did not need elegant apparel to accentuate his good looks, for he was just as manly and striking in what he wore now—a powder-blue shirt, dark trousers and supple chaps, a flat-topped Stetson and half-boots with silver cartwheel spurs. At his bronzed throat was a polka-dot silk bandanna, with his initials embroidered in a corner, a highly prized gift from Virginia Terwilliger, daughter of Wallace Terwilliger, owner of the outfit—and the girl of Duke Laughlin's heart.

Young Laughlin had been born and bred in Kentucky. He had been too young to shoulder arms in the Civil War, but toward the end of it he had run away from home and served as a drummer boy. Then he had drifted to Texas, that exciting huge empire which offered startling opportunities to adventurous, courageous men. He loved horses, and knew them, from his home state. It had not been long before he had acquired a cowboy's ways. A fine shot with rifle or pistol, a splendid rider, he had fitted in. Even his quick temper had been no handicap, because as a rule he was a pleasant and courteous young fellow.

Now, as he loosened his cinches and took the saddle from his mustang's back, he talked soothingly to the animal in his soft drawl. Patting the gelding, he turned him into a pen. He carried his hull into a shed, for he would not dream of leaving it out in the weather. It was a special handmade job, adorned with striking designs cut into the grained, fine leather, and mounted with thick beaten silver. A man would give anything he had for such a work of art.

Laughlin, although he had a foreman's pay, could never have afforded to buy that saddle, for it would have taken three years' salary to pay for it. It also had been a present to him from Virginia, had been made by her grandfather, Old Man Terwilliger.

Laughlin sighed. Poor old man, he thought, he would never make any more such beautiful saddles. For a week ago the patriarch had been found dead a few miles from his home, stabbed and shot.

In his high heels, Duke Laughlin crossed the yard toward the *hacienda.*

The house was a cattle king's home, with radiating wings and many porches, with a battalion of chimneys projecting from the low roof. It was gleaming white and always kept in excellent condition. The ranch buildings had been laid out well, too, on the rise overlooking the mile-wide valley of the Guadeloupe River. Shade trees and flower gardens, horse corrals, springhouse, fences and gates had been blended into a splendid picture.

On rolling, wide salt meadows extending toward the Gulf and toward Victoria town, the nearest settlement, Terwilliger's cattle grazed, marked with a brand outlining a saddle. Felipe Gasca's cows, and Bill Lane's, shared the lush, well-watered range. From the hill behind the ranch gushed cool, unfailing spring waters to supply the needs of the household. A

dozen cowboys worked for Terwilliger, as well as some elderly Mexicans who had attached themselves to the family at one time or another. Their neat quarters, with the bunkhouse, stables and other auxiliary buildings, all fitted into the pastoral scene. The food provided here was the best Laughlin ever hoped to savor—beef, pork and mutton, venison and game birds, home-made breads and preserves, greens, squash, peppers and other vegetables from the lavish gardens the Mexicans tended. Riders brought fresh fish, shrimp and other seafood from the Gulf, thirty miles eastward. With warm sunshine and blue skies the rule, life at the Saddlebrand was happy and gracious.

But Duke Laughlin's face was set and stern for some reason now as he stepped up on the wide front veranda. Two young fellows, their hats tossed aside, were absorbed in some leather carving they were doing but sang out, "Howdy, Duke!" as he passed them.

"Evenin', boys." Laughlin greeted his employer's sons.

Dave Terwilliger was nineteen, Billy was seventeen. They were well-built, attractive youths, good cowboys who had been brought up in the democratic atmosphere of the range, where a man was as good as he could prove himself to be.

DUKE went through the wide, open doorway into the great main room with its rich furnishings. There were two field-stone fireplaces, one at either side of the room. Laughlin swept off his hat and bowed to the two women who were seated beside a table.

"Good evenin', ma'am. Good evenin', Ginny." His Kentucky drawl was soft and pleasant, and every movement he made was instinctively graceful.

His heart jumped a bit, as it always did when he came near Virginia Terwilliger. She was lovely, he thought, so slim and feminine, sitting there with her black hair swept back and tied with a ribbon. Her violet eyes sparkled as they met his. How spirited she always was, Duke thought again. He adored her. And to think that this wonderful twenty-two-year-old girl had promised to marry him! He could hardly realize it yet, although they had been engaged for several months.

It was plain that the girl had inherited her good looks from her mother. Mrs. Terwilliger—the boss' "Dora"—was still slim and lovely herself, her dark hair scarcely touched by the years, for all of her being the mother of three almost grown children.

As Duke crossed toward them, Virginia jumped up and ran to meet him. Mrs. Terwilliger smiled as his arms swept around her daughter, and he kissed her.

"Is your father at home, Ginny?" he asked, as he let her go. "I must see him right away."

"He's in the saddle room, Duke," she said and, noting something in his tone added quickly, "Is anything wrong?"

"I'll tell you about it later, Ginny. I better see him now. Just stopped in to let you know I was home."

When he found Wallace Terwilliger, the owner of the Saddlebrand was sitting in a big room in a wing opening off the living room. Around the walls, on pedestals of native woods, stood beautiful saddles, the leather hand-carved in artistic designs, the mountings of heavy, beaten silver. On shelves and racks were silver bits and jewel cases, carved leather objects of different shapes, pistol holsters and belts, quirts, moccasins, jackets, silver ornaments, cigar and tobacco containers and many other things. All the handiwork of Old Man Terwilliger and of those others he had found such joy in teaching.

Wally Terwilliger, the old man's son and heir, was fifty. He was a well-built man but had taken on weight as he had grown older, despite his active life. His chestnut hair had grayed and deep sun wrinkles radiated from his steady, dark-blue eyes. His complexion was ruddy, and he wore a close-clipped pepper-and-salt beard.

He was a veteran officer of the Confederate Army and had been wounded twice in action in the Civil War, and commended for extreme bravery. His manner was easy, yet he had the dignity befitting a man of influence and power. Terwilliger loved his family and his home, the way of life he had helped his father establish. He had no desire to change the order of it all. The benign range, the horses and cattle, held him and kept him busy.

"Well, Duke," he said as young Laughlin approached him. "How does it look?"

He shoved a leather container with

Indian heads on its sides toward his foreman. It held Cuban cheroots. Duke took one, bit off the end, and lighted it.

He did not speak at once, but sat down, his feet planted on a thick, woven Mexican rug. His employer, he was thinking, had accepted the loss of his father with soldierly fortitude, but Duke knew how deeply he was grieved, which made it all the harder to have to report bad news. But he had to do it.

"Suh," he said, "there's no doubt rustlers have been busy, as sure as that old hound dog out there has fleas. I picked up sign of them all across the range. I reckon it *could* explain your father's killin'. He may have bumped into 'em while they were at work."

Terwilliger took it calmly. He thought about the matter before speaking.

"Where they runnin' 'em to, Duke?" he finally asked.

"I figure to Port Lavaca, suh. The trails all point east. They could load onto schooners there. They must bypass Victoria on the south."

"Sounds logical. The same thing happened when I was a lad. Father took after 'em and I went along. We caught 'em, too, and there was a fight. . . Well, we'll start after these pronto. An hour before dawn. Give the orders and make certain the boys tote rations and plenty of spare ammunition. We'll lie up on Frenchman's Knob and watch from there."

AS LAUGHLIN left his boss he knew he had a great deal to do that evening in preparation for the expedition against the rustlers. And he did. He despatched riders to Felipe Gasca's and Bill Lane's ranches with messages, for Terwilliger's neighbors would want to support him and would feel wounded if left out of the foray. He warned the Saddlebrand cowboys of what was impending and saw to it that arms were burnished and in prime condition, belts filled with the cartridges he issued, and food stored in saddle-bags. He ate with the family as befitted his position as foreman and fiance of the daughter of the house, but spent the rest of the time before he turned in at his tasks.

When the first gray streaks of the new dawn pierced the gloom over the Gulf, the Saddlebrand and the big ranch's allies were hidden in the scrub woods just below the rocky upthrust of Frenchman's Knob. From the height they could see for miles around. Wallace Terwilliger and Laughlin lay flat at a closer vantage point, field-glasses handy. They waited through the warming morning.

The twenty-five cowboys from the three outfits, Felipe Gasca, a stocky, wide-grinning Mexican ranchman with a massive handlebar mustache, and Bill Lane who had married a niece of the Old Man's, took it easy in the shade below. Many dozed, resting before the fight they felt sure was impending.

Now and again either Laughlin or his employer would sweep the horizon with the glasses, but it was late afternoon before they sighted a bunch of men pushing a small herd of cows eastward. They were a quarter mile below Frenchman's Knob as Terwilliger studied them through the lens.

"It's Hammerhead Frank Robles and his crew, Duke!" he exclaimed. "I warned him two years ago to keep off my range!"

All the patiently waiting men now were eager to close with the cattle thieves. The rustlers were traveling at a fast clip. There were fifteen gunhands with Robles, whose distinctive, sharklike figure made it easy for him to be identified. Terwilliger gave orders. The men picked up reins and led their saddled horses down a narrow, winding trail before they could mount. Then, commanded by Terwilliger, they rode out, their speed increasing.

But they had to cross rolling salt meadows and as they broke into the open the enemy sighted them. Robles made a quick decision. Abandoning the cattle, he dug in his spurs. His men streaked after him. With the sun now low in the sky behind them, pursued and pursuers began the race. A few shots were exchanged but the distance between them made fair aim too difficult from the backs of jolting mustang. All reserved their metal.

It soon became plain that Hammerhead Robles was heading for Victoria. Grimly, Terwilliger kept after the man and his rustler party. An hour later, when night fell, the cowmen spread out to prevent their quarry from doubling back. Finally they sighted the twinkling lamplights of the settlement.

"He's gone straight into town, suh," said Laughlin to his boss.

"We'll go in after 'em," Terwilliger said grimly.

Hot on the trail, they raced into town and into a seething caldron of death. In the plaza, Hammerhead Robles and his men were drawn up, dismounted, and with their carbines raised. They had been reinforced by thirty or forty allies, hastily posted around the square. Withering fire greeted the Saddlebrand. Several cowboys were hit by the first volley. One was killed, others badly injured.

Duke Laughlin, Colt roaring, saw Vinny Tate, a Saddlebrand rider who had caught a slug, sinking in his hull. Duke pushed close to catch him. The two excited mustangs shied, but Laughlin held on and pulled Vinny to the buckskin's back. He guided with his knees and kept firing at the embattled rustlers.

"Head for the tall timber, boys!" shouted Wallace Terwilliger.

They had been led into a trap! There was nothing for it now but a quick retreat.

Supporting their wounded, the sullen, furious Saddlebrand contingent swung their mounts around and pulled out of Victoria. Robles and most of the outlaw bunch who had supported him leaped on horses to follow.

Duke Laughlin turned Vinny Tate over to a slightly injured comrade, and took command of the rear guard. With other hard-bitten fighting men of the ranches, the Kentuckian held back the savage, stabbing charges of the vicious enemy. In the pale moonlight on the sweeping, open range southwest of the setlement, it was vital to prevent the killers from surrounding them or they would all be wiped out.

Buck's pistol cracked and the bandit staggered, let go his weapon (CHAP. IV)

CHAPTER III

Complaint

CAPTAIN William McDowell, elderly Chief of Texas Rangers at Austin, crouched in his office chair, his brow deeply wrinkled. That scowl boded no good for those responsible for its being there, for McDowell, though crippled by decades of hard fighting and riding, had a

general's brain that still functioned at the peak of efficiency.

Yet there was sadness, too, in him. News of the killing of Old Man Terwilliger, an old comrade, had just reached him, and besides the grief it caused it was another reminder of how many of his former lusty pards had stepped across the Border of No Return.

"Now is now!" he told himself, and kicked the desk. But that hurt his toe. He jumped up, his back catching him with a stab of agony, then banged the call bell and roared:

"Send in Ranger Hatfield!"

In the anteroom the man on duty heard not only the order but the howl of anguish, and hastily obeyed. In a few minutes a tall figure stood at McDowell's open doorway, and McDowell signaled him in. It always soothed the old officer to see Jim Hatfield, his star Ranger. If he could not go on a case himself, Hatfield could do it for him, for the man had the physical and psychological attributes needed for the most difficult assignment. McDowell saved the hard ones for the rugged Hatfield, whose speed with firearms was phenomenal, whose keen brain could cope with any problem.

"Good mornin', suh."

The Ranger's soft voice belied his power. When he was relaxed, at ease as now, his wide, good-humored mouth relieved the ruggedness of his face, with the gray-green eyes and strong jaw. He was an impressive man, standing well over six feet.

Rangers wore no uniform, so Hatfield was wearing whipcord riding trousers, a blue shirt and red bandanna; a high Stetson canted on his head showed his black hair which shone with the gleam of youth and health. His broad shoulders tapered to slim hips where rode his six-shooters in oiled holsters supported by crossed cartridge belts. In a secret pocket inside his shirt was snugged his Ranger star, for he did not always wear it. He liked to look over a situation before announcing his identity.

Looking at him with approval, the Ranger chief knew that in a scrap Hatfield could strike with the speed and deadly, slashing attack of a panther. In the field he was a master strategist and tactician, able to rally men about him in battle.

"Roll yoreself a quirly and listen," ordered McDowell. "Now—down near Victoria lies the Saddlebrand outfit, and a couple of smaller spreads. They're bein' set upon. I've had complaints from Wallace Terwilliger, son of my old pard, Dan Terwilliger, night after I'd heard the Old Man had been found stabbed and shot to death about ten days back. Great hombre, a Texas hero who fought under Sam Houston and General Taylor. Hammerhead Frank Robles, the stock thief, the son says, is operatin' down there and chances are he downed Dan. The Rangers want Robles. He killed a sheriff up at Lampasas last year and escaped from jail. The rustlers are runnin' off stock but I got a hunch, readin' between the lines of Wally's letter, that there's more to it than that. He writes that he and his friends were badly cut up in a battle in town with Robles and a passel of rascals allied with Hammerhead, and it seems the ranchers now are practically under siege by the cattle thieves. Queer goin's on down there, savvy?"

Under his fierce, rimed brows, the courageous captain watched the cool, mighty Hatfield, as he went on to give him the available facts and briefed him as to possibilities. McDowell was no fool weltering in nostalgic memories of bygone days. While he might regret the titans who had passed on, he knew that this tall Ranger was entirely capable of carrying on the Lone Star traditions, upholding the majesty of Texas.

Soon after McDowell had completed his instructions, he watched from a doorway as Jim Hatfield swung aboard a sleek, strong golden sorrel, his war horse, Goldy. Iron rations, spare ammunition, a fine carbine with a belt of ammunition for the rifle, cased field-glasses, spare shirt rolled in poncho at the cantle pack, made up the Ranger's field equipment. He and his mount could otherwise exist off the country as they operated.

WITH a wave of his long, slim hand to his chief, Jim Hatfield pushed the sorrel from Headquarters and took a lane leading into Congress Avenue, which wide avenue split the capital in twain. Soon he swung into an eastbound artery, with the city rising about him in terraced steps from the deep, scarred banks of the

Colorado River. To the west loomed Mount Bonnell and the blue Colorado range, and here were the public buildings serving the political needs of the greatest of states.

Hatfield guided the sorrel to the eastern outskirts and drew up before a neat, white cottage. The door stood open in the warmth and as he dismounted and dropped rein, a young woman emerged and smilingly greeted him. The sunlight glinted in her thick golden hair, and in her long-lashed amber eyes. This friend of Hatfield's, Anita Robertson, taught school in Austin during the winter months. She and her young brother, Buck, had been the Ranger's closest friends ever since he had rescued them from difficulties on the Brazon when they had been set upon by outlaws.

"I'm makin' a run southeast, Anita," he told her. "How about Buck? Can he ride along with me?"

"Why, of course, Jim. I know he's in the best of hands when he's with you." She called. "Buck! Here's Ranger Jim to see you!"

A tall, lean youth of about sixteen tore out of the stable where he had been at work—Buck Robertson, now Hatfield's protégé.

His face was freckled, and his nose tilted skyward. His levis and gray shirt were carelessly worn, and he had turned his Stetson brim up in front. Buck was not one to care much about personal appearance, for what he cared about were dangerous enterprises, so much so that he was too daring for his own good—or for his sister's peace of mind.

She had about despaired of coping with him herself, knowing that what he needed was the guidance of a strong hand. Anita believed that Jim Hatfield offered that, so she was willing to risk the danger that naturally must be encountered in a law officer's forays, since Hatfield's example could be the best thing possible for her brother. She was glad Hatfield took Buck along with him whenever he could.

Soon Buck had saddled Old Heart 7, his chunky gray mustang which was not much on looks, but long on speed. They took leave of Anita, who watched from the cottage porch until they were out of sight. . . .

They made a fast run, and on their second day out from Austin, evening was near when the two dusty riders sighted Victoria and pushed to the outskirts of the settlement.

"This is a great old town, Buck," the Ranger said. He always took care to prime Buck with the history and lore of Texas on their trips. It was an education, and not many young fellows could hope for such an instructor. "It's filled with beautiful homes and gardens, and goes 'way back. The French explorer, La Salle, sailed along the coast here in Sixteen-eighty-five, history says, but the Spanish had already been around. La Salle was huntin' for the Mississippi, savvy? The Karankawas, the most savage, toughest Indians in Texas attacked him and killed some of his men but he got away from 'em and built a fort he named Saint Louis. From it he made three stabs at findin' the mouth of the Mississippi but on the last run he was killed. Next thing the Spanish set up a mission and their colonizers started this town of Victoria. The Americans came along about then, and you savvy about the wars."

Buck took it in, eagerly watching the town ahead, the large houses, mellowed by the years and surrounded by tall shade trees and gardens.

They rode on to the public square where roses scented the warm air. Facing the plaza were saloons and eating places, hotels and stores, a livery stable and other commercial or civic buildings. Lamps were being lighted as the shadows lengthened, with the sun dropping from sight. From one of the vases came the music of violins and a piano, and the sound of men's voices. Mingling with the perfume of flowers were scents of cooking foods, frying fish and beef, and boiling coffee. It whetted the healthy appetites of the two riders.

"We can get us a real seafood meal here, Buck," said the Ranger. "Fast riders fetch fish, shrimp and lobsters from the coast every mornin'. Let's see to the horses, then eat. That Fish and Steer looks like a good place to stoke up."

THEY rubbed down their mounts after unsaddling at the livery stable corral, and saw to their horses being fed. Then, stiff from long hours in the hull, they walked along the awning-shaded wooden

run and paused outside the Fish & Steer.

It was a large place, with entrances leading into several wings. The central part was occupied by a roomy bar with sawdust on the floor, and aproned tenders serving thirsty customers. To the left were gambling parlors, on the right a restaurant, and there were rooms to rent upstairs. The Fish & Steer sought to combine the good things of the sea and the range. A long sign over the front of the building proclaimed this ambition. On one side a huge fish with bulbous eyes stared at them while from the other lowered a longhorn.

"Keep movin', Buck," whispered the Ranger. "There's Hammerhead Robles in the saloon."

He drifted on, shoulders hunched, for he had quickly glimpsed the sharklike figure of the notorious rustler in the bright lights. Not only that, but the shadowy figures of two men with their backs to the wall on the porch had become alert. The men carried sawed-off shotguns, and it was not hard to guess they were on the prod.

When Hatfield and his youthful aide had walked around the next corner, the Ranger said:

"We better split right now, Buck. If I ever saw outlaw watchmen, the two on the veranda are it. Probably with Robles' bunch."

Texas Rangers had close descriptions of the bandit chief, and his picture had been printed on many "Wanted" circulars, so it had been easy to recognize the man on sight. McDowell had said Hammerhead was in the vicinity of Victoria and the chief's information had been correct. As usual Hatfield wanted to stay out of the limelight as a lawman until he had sized up the situation, and since Buck made a handy observer it was desirable that they should not be seen together.

The night was livening up as Hatfield finished a hearty meal at an eating place down the street from the Fish & Steer. Wassail sounded from honkytonks and saloons as he slid back to peer in again at Hammerhead Frank Robles. The rustler was still at the Fish & Steer bar, surrounded by cronies. Hatfield studied them, wanting to know them the next time he encountered them. Most were rough characters, bearded, and clad in range leather, spurred high boots and Stetsons. They wore their guns with a professional air. Some of the men were short, others tall or of medium height, fat, lean or in between, but to Hatfield's experienced eye all were stamped with the same brand.

One fellow, next to Hammerhead, stood out. He was tall and thin, unusually dark-skinned, and blue-black hair showed from beneath the hat he had shoved back from his bulging brow. He had sunken eye-sockets, and the bones of his face sharply protruded. He did not look like a Mexican. Hatfield decided he might be an Italian. And when the man turned the Ranger noted a black knife handle sticking from a sheath, as well as a pistol at the fellow's narrow hips.

Hatfield took a walk, and although he had been in the town before, he checked on the roads. A good deal of his work was such routine observation, but often vital.

The Ranger planned to sleep in Victoria and the first thing in the morning run out to the Saddlebrand to talk with Wally Terwilliger. Sifting around in this way he might run across possible local allies in town.

HATFIELD stopped at the livery stable to make sure Goldy and Old Heart 7 were all right. He smoked a quirly as he chatted with the night wrangler, who was glad of a chance to retail the gossip in town. The Ranger skillfully led the conversation around until the wrangler voluntarily mentioned Hammerhead Robles' name.

"Yes suh, there's a tough bunch around town! Ever hear tell of Hammerhead Robles? Well, he's here and he's got a passel of gunslingers with him. The Boss warned me to have a loaded shotgun ready, 'cause Robles is the worst hoss thief this side of the Border. Better not leave that handsome sorrel of yores unguarded for long or yuh'll come back and find him gone."

"*Gracias.*" The Ranger nodded. "It's fine to have someone who knows tip an hombre off. A bartender down the street was sayin' there's been shootin' between Hammerhead Frank Robles' bunch and a ranch they call the Saddlebrand."

"Shootin'! I'd say it's a war! Folks are plumb worried. We got a marshal and a

deputy, but they can't handle an army like Robles has. They say the rustlers are runnin' steers off the range over to Port Lavaca. Yuh can always sell 'em there to schooner captains."

When Hatfield returned to the vicinity of the Fish & Steer the shotgun guards were no longer on the porch. Robles, the Italian, and the other armed ruffians had left the saloon. He was strolling on when he caught Buck's low whistle. The lad had been on the watch for him, waiting in a dark spot.

"Jim! Somethin' goin' on. That Hammerhead cuss and his pards are workin' over a couple of prisoners in a barn up the way."

"What they doin'?"

"Indian stuff. Stickin' 'em with knife points and kickin' 'em. I never saw the pore fellers before."

"Show me where. I better see what can be done."

Buck led the way to a lantern-lighted stable on a back road. Armed killers slouched outside the building, among them the shotgunners who had been posted at the Fish & Steer. As Buck had said, something was going on.

CHAPTER IV

Charge

THE approaches to the barn were guarded, and the light made it impossible to draw near enough to look through one of the square windows. But the daring, resourceful Buck Robertson who had been well-trained by the Ranger, turned into a barn belonging to a nearby home. He went up the ladder to the loft and then to the open mow door from which vantage point the Ranger could see down at a slant into the other stable in which they were previously interested. They couldn't see a great deal, but Hatfield could make out Hammerhead Robles and several rustlers standing over a long figure prostrate on the floor, and he could see the legs of another captive whose ankles were tied with rawhide.

As he watched he saw Robles stoop, and a knife flashed in the lantern light. Hammerhead had stuck one of the helpless prisoners.

"Anybody Robles is against must be on our side, Buck," muttered the Ranger. "So we've got to do something about this."

But how to do anything at the moment was another question. They could hardly charge into the building with so many outlaws clustered around. Then, even as he was debating what he could do, gunshots roared from the plaza and high-pitched Rebel yells rang above a sudden hubbub. Colts, shotguns and carbines blared, but the center of the disturbance was near the Fish & Steer. The Ranger and Buck crouched lower in the hay mow. A bellowing voice reached them, carried on the breeze:

"Saddlebrand! This way!"

Three riders quirted up to Robles' stable stronghold as Hammerhead himself lurched from the doorway.

"Come on—come on," shouted one of

[*Turn page*]

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the riders. "Terwilliger's in town! Got his bunch with him!"

Robles shouted orders. Saddled mustangs were waiting and most of the rowdies rushed outside, sprang aboard and pelted off after their chief, the first to mount. Hatfield could make out the dark shapes of five horses still at the rear racks. Two might belong to the unfortunate prisoners, but he could not be sure of it. Neither cowboys nor outlaws seldom moved even a hundred feet without riding, if it could be helped.

The guns down the street roared louder, more and more joining in, and fierce cries told that a battle was raging hot in the center of Victoria. Robles and his bunch had reached the spot and had thrown themselves into the fray.

"Come on, Buck," ordered the Ranger. "Here's our chance."

He did not take the time to use the ladder but shoved through the mow and hung by his hands, then dropped to the soft ground below.

Scuttling to the rear of the lighted stable, he looked in a window. Robles had left three of his killers with the pair of captives who were tied hand and foot and gagged with their own bandannas. They lay on the scattered straw, hatless, and without guns or belts. One of them had crisp chestnut hair, was lean and young, and the Ranger could see sweat standing on his bronzed brow, although a gag covered half his face. The other man was squat and heavy—a Mexican as far as Hatfield could determine—and an older man. His black hair was sprinkled with gray.

But the guards, at that moment, held the attention of the tall officer. Two of them wore crossed cartridge belts, with Colts in their holsters. But the most dangerous would be the one who gripped a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun. All had their heads cocked as they listened to the sounds of the conflict from the center of town, and this helped cover Hatfield's stealthy moves.

Buck was beside him as the Ranger drew a heavy revolver, the hammer spur back under his thumb. He stood at a window corner as he took aim at the man with the shotgun.

"Reach, gents!" he called, his voice sharp and persuasive.

All three jumped violently. One shot his hands upward, then the shotgun wielder whirled, finger on trigger. He was a heavy fellow with a big head, and close-set, red-rimmed eyes glared from a piggish face—and he meant to shoot! Hatfield had to shoot first and shoot fast, for a scattergun loaded with buck could do a lot of damage as it spread. The shotgun belched its load into the floor, then the outlaw crashed hard on his face and lay quiet, a slowly widening trickle of blood running down one cheek.

BUCK'S pistol crackled and one of the other two bandits who had whipped a Colt as the firing began and raised it to blast at the window, staggered, and let go of his weapon. He gripped his punctured shoulder and, yelping, rushed outside and away, bawling for help. The remaining man, the one who had put up his hands at Hatfield's gruff order, stayed frozen like a statue, overcome by fear.

"Get those horses, Buck, pronto," snapped Hatfield. "Lead 'em around to the door there." He loomed in the window, Colt cocked and ready as he backed at the intimidated guard: "Hey, you! Take that knife and cut those cords. Jump! I'll open you wide if you harm these men." He spoke in a rasping, undistinguishable voice and kept back a pace, out of the light.

The bearded killer gulped and gingerly lowered his hands.

"Yes suh, Mr. Terwilliger! Don't shoot! I'll do like yuh tell me." He drew his hunting knife and stooped over the captives, sawing away at the rawhide thongs.

The freed men leaped up and tore off their bandanna gags. The next instant they had taken from their erstwhile captor his cartridge belts and Colts. Hatfield saw then that the tall, lean young fellow with the chestnut hair had a clipped mustache. The stout Mexican whose black eyes were rolling, wore a tremendous handlebar affair which extended under his ears.

"Senor Duke!" the Mexican shouted. "Pronto! Come on!"

The man he called Duke had reached for his Stetson on a wooden peg. He strapped on the hat and scaled a peaked sombrero to the Mexican. Their next swift move was to shove the disarmed, frightened bandit into a corner.

"Lie down on your face and stay there," snarled Duke.

They had to hurdle the former shotgun expert who now lay unmoving in the open exit. Hatfield loped down to join them as the lantern light outlined them.

"Here's horses, gents!" called Buck.

"What in blazes!"

Duke was as taken aback as was his older comrade as the light showed the faces of their rescuers. They had expected men they knew, and here were two strangers who had snatched them from death.

"Easy!" warned the Ranger, towering over them. "Let's mount and ride out where we can palaver. We're friends."

This Duke, he saw, was a tall and handsome young man with striking brown eyes. His clothing was good but was rumpled and dirtied now from the manhandling he had received. Small cuts in his tanned cheeks showed where a knife point had stuck him. The Mexican was in the same condition.

All of them realized that some of Robles' men might return at any moment to blast them down, with sheer strength of numbers in their favor. Duke and the Mexican jumped to saddle. Hatfield ripped the rein of the mustang Buck had commandeered for him. As he turned away from the stable, his gray-green eyes fixed on the one pale-blue eye of the shotgunner he could see. It was wide open—he could not see the other—and it seemed to bulge from the piggish face, stained with blood.

But now horsemen were racing up from the other direction, perhaps summoned by the man who had run out. Buck and the two men who had been snatched from death were riding swiftly away, and Hatfield hurried after them. As they took the first turn they could see the plaza. A battle was raging there.

"Gasca!" cried Duke to his companion, pulling up for a moment. "That's the boss and our whole shebang! I bet they came for us."

"*Si, si!*" Gasca, the Mexican, was terrifically excited. His white teeth gleamed and he shook with eagerness, clutching the pistol he had taken from the Robles man. "We must go pronto, Duke, *si!*"

"*Gracias* to you, suh," said Duke to Hatfield. "I'm Laughlin, foreman of the Saddlebrand, and this is Senor Felipe Gasca, a neighbor. We were set on by a passel of rascals who almost did for us. I don't savvy why you risked yore hides for ours but we sure won't forget it. Right now, though, our pards are makin' a fight and we've got to join in."

"We'll give a hand!" answered the Ranger. "And tell your boss I'll be out to see him."

Duke Laughlin and Gasca spurred off, hurrying into battle. Hatfield and Buck swung along a side road, passing the rear of the Fish & Steer. They emerged farther down the plaza which was lighted by lamps on posts. They saw the opposing factions, many of them ahorse, firing, and howling insults at each other. The unexpected charge of the Saddlebrand had driven the outlaws past the Fish & Steer, but Hammerhead Robles was holding him, and more gunhands were coming to lend him a hand.

AS THE Ranger considered how best he could assist Terwilliger's outfit, Duke Laughlin and Felipe Gasca flashed past, riding low over their borrowed mustangs. They had been held up for a few minutes by a stubborn knot of the outlaws, but now were rejoining their own forces. Hearty cheers greeted them.

The Saddlebrand, their mission of rescue accomplished, began to melt away, cutting out of town by lanes and the openings between buildings. Hammerhead Robles and his yelling, shooting riders came charging down the center of the street.

"Let's fade, Buck," warned the Ranger. "I reckon the Saddlebrand came in to rescue Duke and the Mexican so now they'll be hightailin' for the ranch—fast."

There was no sense in attracting the lead of the rustlers now. So Hatfield and Buck turned their horses and rode away from the center of the disturbance. They allowed time for the town to return to normal, then dropped off their borrowed mustangs near the livery stable and turned the animals loose. They belonged to Robles' men and might be recognized, make plenty of trouble for men riding them.

Before long Hammerhead Robles and knots of his riders began returning, having given up the night run after the Saddlebrand riders as a bad job. They slipped from their saddles and swaggered into the

Fish & Steer. Hatfield watched, nodding with satisfaction.

"Looks like our new friends broke clear, Buck," he said. "S'pose we turn in."

They had made arrangements to sleep in a long carriage shed at the rear of the livery stable, and their rest was not disturbed for Victoria remained quiet for the rest of the night. Early the next morning Hatfield gave Buck money for expenses and told him to stay in town and keep an eye on the bold and obstreperous outlaws. The Ranger intended to visit the Saddlebrand for a consultation with Wallace Terwilliger.

He ate a hearty meal, but did not eat with Buck for obvious reasons. Then, saddling the golden gelding, he took a road south out of Victoria. Soon he came to cotton fields where the highway was hemmed in by maturing crops. When he was sure he was not being trailed, he chose a lane branching southwest from the cotton plantations, one which led to rolling salt meadows which stretched on for miles. Knowing the location of the Saddlebrand, he cut across country to the river to reach it.

The sun was hot and yellow and a sticky breeze blew at his back, scented by the Gulf and the meadows. As he rode he noted bunches of cows and some mustangs, local stock. A couple of brand signs, saddle-shaped, nailed to trees pointed the way to the ranch.

"It's a real outfit, Goldy," he murmured, as he came into full sight of Terwilliger's holdings.

On a plateaulike rise overlooking the mile-wide valley of the Guadeloupe stood the cattle king's home, as spacious as a palace and surrounded by auxiliary buildings, shade trees and gardens. Against the backdrop of the rock-toothed ridge it made a thrilling, gracious picture.

Cowboys on guard sighted him, but he rode on in, slowly, sure of himself. Duke Laughlin hurried from the home and as the Ranger waved a hand overhead, the foreman recognized the tall figure and signaled him in, telling the waddies he was a friend.

At Laughlin's invitation Hatfield dismounted. The two regarded one another for moments and smiled, each satisfied with what he saw. Boyce Laughlin was spruce this morning in a gray shirt, chaps and dark trousers and his familiar flat-topped Stetson. The Ranger did not miss the initialed silk kerchief at the foreman's throat, nor the silver cartwheel spurs at the high heels of his expensive half-boots. The young man's clipped mustache accented his patrician features, even with the cuts on his bronzed cheeks, reminders of what Hammerhead Robles had done to him the night before.

"Mighty glad you've come, suh," Duke said, and the Ranger liked his Kentucky drawl, which was in no sense affected, but was as natural as his inborn courtesy.

His grip was firm when he shook hands, looking straight into the Ranger's gray-green eyes.

"We were in sort of a rush last evenin'," he said, "and I didn't have time to thank you right, but I'd like to do it now. You see, Senor Gasca and I had sneaked into Victoria, scoutin' the rustler enemy, when a passel of Robles' sidewinders surrounded us. They run us to that stable. Hammerhead had plans for us, it seems—said he was goin' to use us for live bait, then kill us. Mr. Terwilliger, who was hid not far outside town, figured we'd been captured when we didn't come back when we were expected. He thought we might be held close to the Fish & Steer, which is Robles' drinkin' headquarters, so when the boys decided to come after us they charged that part of town. You savvy the rest."

BEFORE Hatfield could comment, a stout figure rushed from the kitchen —Felipe Gasca, his grin engulfing his ears, his huge mustache twitching with emotion. He wore velvet and a crimson sash into which had been stuck a pistol and knife but his bushy gray head was bare, for he had been eating when he had looked out and seen the tall visitor.

"Senor Majestico!" he bawled, coining his own title for the powerful young fighting man who had snatched him from torture and death. He pumped Hatfield's arm, thanking him in Spanish and English.

A Texan trailed Felipe Gasca, a man of fifty, a weighty individual, but well-built. Sun wrinkles radiated from serious dark-blue eyes and were etched in his ruddy cheeks which were further adorned by a close-trimmed pepper-and-salt beard. His dignity commanded the respect of both his

visitor and his own men as he joined the group. Boyce Laughlin turned to him.

"Mr. Terwilliger," he said, "this is the gent I told you about who pulled us out of a tight last night."

"He ees our *amigo!*" shouted Gasca. "*Tequila* and food for Senor Majestico!"

Wallace Terwilliger, owner of the Saddlebrand, held out his hand. Hatfield stepped close to the rancher and, as he shook hands, he murmured:

"From Austin, suh. Hatfield's my handle."

Terwilliger stared, but gave an understanding nod.

"Please come in," he invited.

He escorted the visitor to the house, with Gasca chattering at Hatfield's other side, and Duke and the other cowboys bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER V

The Saddlebrand

INSIDE, there were others for Hatfield to meet. Among them was Bill Lane, owner of the adjoining Circle L, and a relative of the Terwilliger family by marriage. He was Terwilliger's age, a quiet and unassuming man with a wiry body and honest features. He wore leather, and a walnut-stocked Colt revolver was in his plain holster.

Terwilliger introduced Hatfield to his wife, slim, beautiful Dora, and to his daughter, Virginia, whose black hair and sparkling violet eyes made her one of the prettiest girls the Ranger had ever seen. When he soon gathered that she and Duke Laughlin had an understanding, he couldn't blame the foreman. Dave and Billy Terwilliger, sons of the household, were also present.

The family had been eating at a long table in a flower-decked patio, and servants were coming and going with huge platters piled with joints of meat, smoked fish, potatoes and bread, preserves and vegetables, fruit and drinks. When Hatfield accepted the invitation to join them he was plied with everything in sight.

As they talked during the meal, he learned among other things that Felipe Gasca had a wife and fifteen children at his ranch, and that Bill Lane also had a family to take care of, but that both had unhesitatingly joined in when Terwilliger had been attacked. The rustling was a vital matter to all of them. Horses and cows had been stolen from the range, but more than that, during the hard fighting two cowboys had died while others had been wounded. Old Man Terwilliger, patriarch of the clan, also had been killed not long before—stabbed and shot not far from home.

"We have no doubt that Robles and his pards killed my father at the start of all this," declared Wally Terwilliger seriously. "The rustler bunch infesting this section have proved much stronger than we had supposed. It appears that another band, led by an Italian they call Stiletto Joe Battolini has joined Robles."

"What's this Battolini look like?" the Ranger asked.

"Like a walkin' skeleton, if you ask me," chimed in Laughlin.

Terwilliger nodded. "Duke's right. Stiletto Joe is as bony as a skeleton all right, his eyes are sunk deep in his skull, and his hide's as yellow as that of an hombre with the jaundice. He fancies a stiletto, too, and I'm not forgetting there were a couple of narrow, deep stabs in my father's body."

Hatfield listened to the story they had to tell, in all its details. The ranchers, it was plain, were frankly worried, aware that powerful criminal forces had been arrayed against them, and with no idea of what to do about it. And, so far, the local law had proved helpless in coping with the situation.

The Ranger had not told anyone, except Terwilliger, who he was. The silver star on silver circle, emblem of his organization, was still in its hidden pocket, and would remain there until he marshalled facts sufficiently to take action as a state official.

When they had finished eating, Terwilliger caught his eye and rose. "Will you excuse us, folks?" the rancher murmured. "I have some business to talk over with our guest."

He led Hatfield through the cool, vaulted rooms, furnished with hand-carved pieces, the walls hung with tapestries from Spain. He opened a heavy

oak paneled door and showed the Ranger into a large room which took up all of a side wing.

"We call this the saddle room," he explained, as he bowed his guest in.

Hatfield stood on a thick Mexican rug, with hand-woven Inca designs running through it. He could not restrain a gasp of surprise and appreciation as he glanced around, for in this saddle room were some of the most beautiful art objects he had ever laid eyes upon—and his was a fine taste. He quickly noted that most of the things in this private museum were connected with the range and had a practical use as well as artistic appeal.

Around the paneled walls stood pedestals of native woods worked and polished so the grain stood out and on these were hand-made saddles of carved leather with mountings of heavy beaten silver. On the racks and shelves were silver bits, jewel cases, pistol holsters and belts studded with precious metal, moccasins and boots, jackets, ornaments, quirts and bridles, lariats and other like articles in use on a range.

"Mind if I look around, suh?" asked the Ranger. "I've never seen anything like this in my life."

"Help yourself." Terwilliger nodded, pleased with his interest.

The rancher shut the door and picked up a cylindric leather container, banded with beaten silver and with Indian heads in relief on the sides, the same one he had offered to his foreman, Duke Laughlin. Hatfield accepted one of the West Indian cheroots in it and lighted up with his host as Terwilliger walked about the saddle room, pointing to some special piece now and then and telling its history.

"My father made the best of the things you see here," said Terwilliger. "He was a genius. Here's a saddle I made, but you can see it doesn't compare with his. Here's one Felipe Gasca carved—it's excellent. He was almost as good as Dad. They worked together a lot."

WHEN they had finished their tour, Hatfield took a chair facing Wally Terwilliger and they talked.

"Cap'n McDowell had your letter, suh," he said. "He was grieved about your father for he had known him well. He sent me to see what can be done, about this range trouble you're in—but I've been thinking. The stuff in this room is worth a small fortune. Does Hammerhead Robles know about it?"

"I reckon so." Terwilliger shrugged. "Everybody does. Folks come to the ranch and ask to see the saddles."

"Of course your cattle are valuable, too, but usually rustlers hit and run. They don't organize and come at you in the open the way Hammerhead and Battolini are doin'." The Ranger was seeking a reasonable explanation for the vicious thrusts of the outlaw band.

Bluish smoke from the Cuban cheroots drifted slowly ceilingward as the two men talked. Terwilliger poured drinks in heavy silver mugs on a silver tray, passing them to his guest, then resuming his seat. As he watched Hatfield his reddish-hued, bearded face was impassive, and did not suggest anything in answer to the officer's speculations.

"You believe they may be after yore land and cows, then, and perhaps what's in the house?" pressed the Ranger. "Is there anything else yuh can guess at?"

Wally Terwilliger held his gaze for a time. He had thrust out his lower jaw a bit and his teeth were clenched. He looked away with a brief shake of his head.

Jim Hatfield did not insist on the point. But Terwilliger's slight hesitation and a certain uneasy feeling the Ranger experienced made him wonder if his host was being altogether frank with him. He had been sent here to assist and save the rancher from rustler trouble, not to quarrel with him, so he let it pass for the time being. Diplomacy was another of the characteristics which helped make Jim Hatfield the best law enforcement officer in Texas.

Terwilliger gave him figures on the strength of what the three outfits concerned could muster, and described the savage duels that had occurred, without equivocation. He was certainly delighted, he said, to have Senor Majestico, as Gasca had dubbed the tall fellow from Austin, as an ally.

"Call on me for anything we got, Ranger," he concluded. "We're with you to the death."

"*Bueno.* I'll remember that . . . One thing, Mr. Terwilliger—I'd like to stay

sort of unobtrusive till I see what lies ahead, so if anybody asks you about me, just say I'm a friend from San Antonio. I'd like, if I can, to work in with Hammerhead Robles and his cattle thieves. That way I could learn more."

After a little more discussion the two left the saddle room and went out into the sunlit yard. Below the ranch buildings the Guadeloupe wound through the lovely valley. Flowers and shade trees grew around the *hacienda* in profusion. Everywhere was an atmosphere of well-being, and the unmistakable aura that surrounded a loving, devoted family. What more could a man ask of life, mused the Ranger. Even though lately miscreants had caused trouble, that should not upset the tenor of such a placid existence in the long run.

Terwilliger seemed to divine the Ranger's thoughts. "Yes, it's beautiful, isn't it?" he said. "I never get tired lookin' at it. Home is home, and my father and I always fought to keep it the way we like it. It would be a shame to spoil such a place. Don't yuh think so, suh?"

"I certainly do."

Duke Laughlin, Hatfield noticed, was saddling a buckskin gelding and others were getting ready to ride. Felipe Gasca and Bill Lane were going home with their cowboys, but they would stand by, be ready to rush over at any alarm.

"Duke's goin' with 'em a ways," explained Terwilliger. "Then ride circle and see if anythin's stirrin'. Would yuh care to go along and view the country? Take any horse you like in the corrals."

"*Gracias.* My own will do and I'll string along if Duke doesn't mind."

Laughlin was delighted to have him. Saddling Goldy, Hatfield rode out with the men.

Gasca was as grinning and voluble as usual. The Mexican's home was near the river and when they rode up to it the yard was filled with children, from practically naked crawling babies to young men and women. Gasca insisted that Senor Majestico come in and meet his wife, a stout, excitable woman who, on hearing that this tall stranger had saved her husband's life, hugged and kissed him, to his acute embarrassment. Youngsters clustered about, gaping at the mighty officer, and the sincerity in the welcome of all of them was such that it was hard to tear away from their lavish hospitality.

BILL LANE had left them before they reached Gasca's, riding on to his own ranch. After saying good-by to the Mexican ranch family, Duke Laughlin and the Ranger rode along the Guadeloupe for a time. The foreman pointed out where they had picked up Old Man Terwilliger, and said that no clues of significance had been found there. They circled up rising slopes out of the river valley, passing through woods on winding trails and skirting rocky upthrusts. Both were continuously on the alert, but all seemed quiet. Now and then they sighted cattle and twice flushed small bands of range mustangs before them.

The run gave Hatfield a good idea of the land before they returned to the Saddlebrand in the late afternoon, and gave the countersign to the outriders. Terwilliger kept on guard, day and night, to guard against surprise attacks. His hosts begged him to stay for supper and the Ranger decided he would. He might, he thought, get closer to Terwilliger. At any rate he could get back to Victoria under cover of darkness and be there by the time the evening warmed up. As a rule, such men as Hammerhead Robles and Stiletto Joe Battolini slept through the day and operated at night.

The sun was low when they sat down to another sumptuous repast prepared by the Mexican cooks. High white candles in silver sticks flickered on the long table. They ate in leisurely fashion, and dark fell before the evening meal was concluded. Afterward the men sat in the saddle room for a time, smoking and talking, then the Ranger arose to take his leave. He thanked Terwilliger for his hospitality.

"You'll hear from me, suh," he promised. "Soon as possible. I have a young compadre named Buck Robertson, a skinny boy with tow hair who rides a chunky gray horse. Warn your men to be on the lookout for him in case I send him here with a message."

"*Bueno.*" Terwilliger nodded.

The boss of the Saddlebrand and his foreman accompanied the Ranger to the yard, Duke carrying a lantern, and stood by as Hatfield saddled the golden gelding.

Just as he swung over a long leg, however, a gunshot rang out in the night and a sharp cry reached them. On the heels of this more rifles snarled, there were challenging hoots, and thudding hoofs could be heard.

"That's Jackie, one of our outriders!" cried Terwilliger.

Hatfield dropped off and hastily sent Goldy away into the shadows. The sorrel was trained to disappear on signal, and to come when the Ranger whistled. He had hardly disposed of his horse when a Saddlebrand waddy tore in, pulling up in a cloud of dust. He had been riding guard northeast of the buildings.

"They're comin', Boss—a passel of 'em!" he reported excitedly. "Hammerhead and his bunch, suh!"

There was not much time for them to take cover and make ready for the shock of attack, but they made what haste they could. Hatfield, gripping his loaded carbine, took a stand near a stable. From this vantage point he could cover any movement in the yard.

Robles came in fast, aware that he and his men had been sighted, that there was no chance of surprise. His riders howled fiercely, charging the Saddlebrand with their spurs dug deep, their guns blasting.

CHAPTER VI

The Range Napoleon

SADDLEBRAND lead met the onrushing outlaws. A horse screamed and went down, rolling over and over. Landing on his feet the rider ran for it. Glass tinkled and slugs ripped the walls. The Ranger coolly handled his carbine, particularly watching for a chance at Hammerhead Robles, but the outlaw leader did not once cross his sights.

The lanterns on poles in the yard were quickly shot out by the attackers but in the dim light that came from the turned-down lamps in the ranchhouse the shifting shapes of the horsemen could be distinguished against the moonlit sky as they tore back and forth, yowling and firing.

"Get in there and rip 'em!" a voice roared. That was Hammerhead Robles egging on his gunslingers.

In answer, Hatfield saw knots of bandits flash up to three points. To his left, the outlaws threw themselves from their mustangs close to a door. A couple had axes and the blows from them rang out as sharply as pistol cracks, as the heavy blades splintered the thick panels. But flaming guns from the windows of a wing commanding the portal drove the bold crew back to their horses. They left one of their number stretched in the dirt close to the wall.

Another bunch of the more reckless hit the kitchen entry. Containers in their hands were filled with kerosene or other inflammable oil which they dashed against the oak door and quickly touched it off. Yellow flame rose as the oil blazed up. The Ranger's carbine was right in line with the arsonists, however, and his tearing metal largely contributed to the haste they showed in leaving the hot spot. By now Saddlebrand bullets had Robles' assault crew in a crossfire and it was only by luck that the men who were blocked off by the very blaze they had set managed to scuttle away.

Disappointed yelps from around the other wings told Hatfield that others of Robles' picked shock troop of raiders had failed to make good. Cheers of triumph joined the din as the Saddlebrand whooped in victory. They had stung the killers back at every point.

The minutes seemed to drag out interminably. For a time the ignited coal-oil licked up, but the thick walls of the casa were of adobe brick. Only doors, window frames and trimmings were of hard wood and that was well-seasoned. The back door was scorched but it did not burn through and as the kerosene consumed itself, more smoke than fire came from the closed portal.

The reception the raiders had met, the failure of their plan to break inside the *hacienda*, took the heart out of Robles' paid gunhands. More and more rode off to a safer distance. They kept firing but their slugs did little harm. A couple tried to enter the stable where Hatfield crouched, but when he swung his carbine on them and let go, they hastily departed.

"That's about it," muttered the Ranger, reloading and letting his gun cool as he

watched the retreat.

For a short interval the outlaws hung around the ranch, hurling lead and insults. Then Hammerhead gave it up as a fizzle. The shooting abated and the dust began to settle as Robles swung back for the road to town.

Hatfield was the first of the defenders to venture outside. A quick checkup told him it was not a ruse, that the enemy had indeed had enough for the moment. Their plan to smash through by main strength of numbers and gunfire had failed.

Terwilliger and Duke Laughlin, with others of the Saddlebrand outfit joined the Ranger. A few buckets of water doused the small fires remaining and cooled the blackened oak doors. Cowboys rode out to circle the ranch and make certain Hammerhead had left the neighborhood.

When they came back to report all clear, Hatfield whistled for Goldy, and for a second time took his leave. He hit the pike which wound northeast through the rolling salt meadows to Victoria, where the dust of Robles' passing was still hanging in the warm night air.

It was nearly midnight when he reached the old town. The Fish & Steer and other such emporiums were still whooping it up. In the Fish & Steer Hammerhead Robles and Stiletto Joe Battolini were sagged over the bar, looking tired and discouraged. Most of their gunmen also were in the saloon. It was a gratification to the Ranger to see that some of the outlaws had been wounded, and their injuries, when slight, had been hastily tied up. Now everybody was drinking after the long run and the battle at the Saddlebrand, to the accompaniment of music, a battle of voices, and the click of wheels from the gambling room.

HATFIELD did not see Buck anywhere, so made his way to the livery stable. His wrangler acquaintance there greeted him, telling him his young friend was in the shed where they slept. The Ranger rubbed down the golden gelding, turned him into a pen, then went to find Buck who was dozing.

"Jim! Mighty glad you're back." The lad yawned and rubbed sleep from his eyes. "Got lots to tell you. The cusses left town late this afternoon. After you rode for the Saddlebrand, I trailed Hammerhead and Stiletto Joe Battolini, and what do you know! They got a pard or maybe he's their boss, for they sure kowtow to him. He lives in the best rooms at the Fish and Steer."

"You find out his handle?"

"From what the register book says, it's Napier Snodgrass, and I heard Hammerhead call him Nappy. After they saw him they took it easy most of the day, but before dark all of 'em met in the plaza. Snodgrass saw 'em off and, with Robles and Battolini leadin', they hit the road southwest."

"They're back now, Buck." Hatfield nodded quickly. "They attacked the ranch but were driven off. This Snodgrass hombre sounds interestin'. What does he look like?"

"He's short and heavy and wears dude clothes. I don't cotton to him. He looks mean as a rattlesnake."

Buck and the Ranger walked toward the Fish & Steer, and the youth pointed out the three windows he said were in Snodgrass' rooms. They opened onto a long gallery but the lighted sign would show a man standing outside them, should anyone be observing from the road.

"No use tryin' the halls either Jim," said Buck. "They keep a watch night and day."

"Huh. That gallery doesn't run around to the sides, though, so I'll either have to drop to it from the roof or go through another room when I come to it. If I stay flat I would be pretty much out of sight unless somebody was watchin' across the street. Wait here for me."

The Ranger strolled along the wooden sidewalk and glanced through the batwings which were propped open to catch any available breezes. Hammerhead Robles was still hanging over the counter, sopping it up, but Stiletto Joe had left. Hatfield stepped up on the low veranda and entered the saloon. Robles was staring at his glass of red-eye, and in a grumpy humor.

Then in the big mirror behind the rows of bottles, the Ranger sighted Battolini, coming from the hotel side. Hatfield was near enough to hear what the Italian said to Robles.

"Nappy wants you, Hammerhead. Now!"

Robles shrugged. He poured a last three-fingers and downed it in a single gulp, then stalked after Battolini toward the main staircase leading to the second floor.

Hatfield went back outside and found Buck.

"Cross over and keep watch, Buck," he instructed. "Hootowl me if I'm spied, savvy? I'll have to go over the roof—there's no time to locate an empty room."

He could not chance an alarm upstairs anyway by pushing into an occupied chamber, and as Buck had told him, the corridors were guarded around the entrance to Snodgrass' rooms.

Buck moved across the square to a point where he could see the gallery and lighted windows, open in the warm night. Hatfield hurried around the side of the Fish & Steer. Toward the rear he found a rickety outside stairway, used by the help and by guests in a hurry to reach the stables behind the large establishment. He went up it and by standing on the guard rail at the top, easily reached the edge of the flat roof and pulled himself up. Keeping low, he made his way to the front until he was over the balcony. It had a roof, an extension of the main roof. After checking to make sure nobody was noticing him, save Buck, he swung down and landed lightly.

He was in the light from the sign. Moths, flies and other insects, attracted by the glowing oil lamps, swarmed about, and thousands were lying dead where they had fallen after flirting with the hot flames. The Ranger crouched in the partial shadow cast by the low railing. Other windows opened on the long gallery and over the noises from below he could catch the voices of people in their rooms. He crept along silently, crouched down.

THE windows of Snodgrass' rooms stood wide and he chanced a glance into one. It was the one used as a sitting room, and there sat Hammerhead Robles and Stiletto Joe. They were faced by a short, stout man who stood in the center of the carpet, railing at Robles whose ugly face was a deep-red. Apparently Battolini had already caught it but now and then the dumpy fellow would include the cadaverous-faced knifeman in his diatribe.

"Snodgrass," thought Hatfield. "Buck had him right."

He could make out the venomous, muddy eyes, the thin, dark hair stuck to Snodgrass' pasty brow. The fellow's paunch protruded, and his nearly lipless mouth writhed as he verbally lashed Robles. His fat arms were folded across his chest, his head was down. On such close examination Snodgrass did remind one of a serpent.

"Drat it!" he was saying in the tone another man might have used for a string of vicious oaths. "For all the good it did me I might as well have sent a bunch of schoolboys after Terwilliger, Robles. The way you talked, you could handle anything, but even with Battolini and his men you couldn't take one weakly-defended ranch. How do you expect me to get on with the business I have in mind if you fall down on me?"

He whipped a handsome snuff box from his pocket and after sniffing a pinch, sneezed two or three times. Napoleon took snuff, so naturally Snodgrass did.

"Shucks, Nappy," growled Hammerhead Robles, squirming uncomfortably in his chair. "They put up a real hard defense, I tell yuh. Those walls won't burn—they're adobe. Them fellers are good shots, too, and picked off so many of the boys we had to hightail."

"Rubbish!" Snodgrass harshly contradicted. "Rubbish, I say. So far, Terwilliger has fought you both to a standstill. You couldn't even hold his friend Gasca and his foreman when you had 'em. You must show results, Robles. I won't accept further silly excuses. Increase the pressure on Terwilliger and his bunch. Run off every head of stock on the range!"

"I ain't got enough men for that and for fightin' too," argued Hammerhead sullenly.

"Hire more, hire a hundred if need be, for the job. It shouldn't take long. What's the roof?"

"Huh?" asked Robles, blinking.

"Tch-tch. I'm afraid you're not too bright. What is the roof at the Saddlebrand made of? You say the walls won't burn."

Hammerhead Robles scratched his head. "Come to think of it, I believe it's shin-

gled. Ain't it, Joe?"

"I theenk so." Battolini nodded.

"You *think* so," sneered Snodgrass. "You've been around there enough to know by this time, it seems to me. Oh dear, oh dear!" He clasped his head in a theatric gesture. "I'll have to take the field myself to show you how it's done."

Robles lost his temper, already on a raw edge. "If yuh're so all-fired smart, Nappy, how would you rout out those cusses? Every time we try to smash 'em they run inside their fort. They're tougher than we figgered."

"Tiddledewinks! It's simple. Pick up a couple of heavy Indian bows, and a dozen arrows. Fasten oil-soaked tinder to the arrowheads, light 'em and lob the arrows onto the dry shingles. When Terwilliger and his men are smoked out, shoot 'em down."

Hammerhead thought it over. "It might work, at that," he agreed. "It's a good idea. I'll get some more fighters pronto and go to it, Nappy."

"That's the way to talk. When Terwilliger is ruined he'll lead us to what we're after. . . . Oh pshaw, my head's splitting. I must sleep. Go now, and let's not have any more mistakes."

He dismissed them with an imperious wave of the hand and stalked toward the bedroom.

"Why, he acts like he thinks he's Napoleon," mused the listening Ranger.

He did not know—then—that Snodgrass did affect the mannerisms of the Corsican who had made himself Emperor of France. And the old-fashioned expletives he had used sounded as vicious as any profanity.

As Hammerhead Robles and Battolini left, Hatfield stole off. No use watching Snodgrass any longer. He was about to retire.

THE way looked clear so he slid down a waterpipe at the dark end of the gallery, then went into the bar. Stiletto Joe and Robles had resumed their drinking bout. Many of their men were at the bar or the tables. In his Ranger work, Hatfield had seen many ruffians, but none who could top this crew.

Drifting through, he found a bandit seated at a table with his head in his arms. He was one of Hammerhead's riders, Hatfield knew, because he had seen the man at the Saddlebrand and in Victoria.

On a hunch, the Ranger took a seat across from the sodden gunhand, who was alone in his corner. When a waiter passed, Hatfield ordered a bottle. When the liquor arrived he reached over to shake the outlaw awake. Muttered curses were his first reward but as he insisted the bleary, red-rimmed eyes focused on him and the rustler sat up.

"Drink, pard," said the Ranger. "It's on me."

"*Gracias.*" The fellow was dirty, unshaven, his clothing awry, but his weapons were in excellent condition.

Hatfield's own appearance was no better. After the fighting at the Saddlebrand and his trip to the balcony, his own clothing was in a sad state, and he was just as begrimed as the other man. And the whisky the thin, sallow bandit had consumed had dulled his powers of observation.

Moreover, during the battles with Hammerhead's band, Hatfield had stayed out of their sight save for the brief moments when he had rushed in to snatch Duke Laughlin and Felipe Gasca from death. At that time only a couple of gun-stunned killers had been present and he believed he was safe enough from recognition now.

CHAPTER VII

The Roping

HATFIELD, entirely at ease, feigned to be somewhat mellow himself. For a time he and the sullen bandit drank and talked about the weather and the price of beef. Boasting was natural to such men as this gunslinger, and it was not long before he was at it.

"Yes, I'm makin' high pay, a lot better than a feller gets for punchin' cows, hombre. Easy work, too, if yuh ain't afeared of the song lead sings yuh."

"Yuh're shore right, amigo," Hatfield agreed, dropping easily into the familiar Texas drawl. "I quit chasin' longhorns for thirty per long ago. I found better ways to earn my pay."

"Yuh look salty enough, at that." The outlaw squinted at him.

Hatfield shrugged and filled the glasses again. "Now and then I do some dodgin' but it don't bother me any. Me and my pard was workin' back and forth across the Rio Grande but they shot him one mornin' when he got careless." He had been gradually dropping the impression he was on the run.

"Huh." It sank in, and finally the sallow gunhand asked, "Why don't yuh try for a job with us? We got a big crew but they're hirin' more."

The Ranger did not want to appear too eager. He apparently thought it over before answering.

"Oh, I don't know," he finally said. "I've worked things out for myself over near Cuero. There's a big feud goin' on there and I hear they're payin' as high as a hundred a month for good shots like yores truly."

"I'll bet yuh can swing them hoglegs, at that. Listen, though. Talk to Robles before yuh pull out. If yuh join in with us the work could be steadier and last a while."

"Cattle?"

"Yeah, and fightin' when yuh're ordered. We've run bunches of cows over to Port Lavaca. The boss has somebody there to buy 'em."

"But why the scrappin'? Another feud?"

His unsteady companion shook his head. "I ain't shore. I don't rightly care so long as I get my pay regular. It could be feudin'. We been goin' after an outfit called the Saddlebrand, hammer and tongs."

It was plain enough that Hatfield had managed to impress the gunhand.

"Just speak to Hammerhead," urged the sallow outlaw. "Say, I know what. I'll tell him yuh're an old pard of mine and that'll cinch it. What's yore handle?"

"Right now it happens to be Jim Hasty."

It took a moment for that to sink in, then the outlaw guffawed. "That's a good one. Well, they call me Nail Wagner. Come on—it looks like the boss is pullin' out." It was, in fact, so late now that even the barflies were yawning.

Nail Wagner rose, unsteady on his feet, and Hatfield moved around the table to support him before he collapsed. They crossed the sawdust under the hot, yellow oil lamps swinging by gilt chains from oak rafters. Robles and Battolini were turning from the bar.

"Hammerhead!" Wagner swayed as he came to a stop. "Yuh said yuh needed more fighters. Here's an old *compadre* of mine. Name's Jim Hasty."

Robles regarded the recruit. "Hasty? Hasty on the draw or hasty on the run?"

Both Hatfield and Wagner laughed heartily, but the cadaverous, suspicious-eyed Battolini did not crack a smile. The success of his jest pleased Hammerhead, though, and he drew aside with Hatfield and Nail Wagner. Seen at close quarters Robles was more unprepossessing than Hatfield had thought he was. His tall sharklike form was in sweated, stained clothing. His nose was badly mashed, his ears cauliflowered, the irises of his inflamed eyes a pale-blue. Under a growth of black whiskers his skin was clammily so pale that his nickname seemed apt.

Battolini waited, a few paces away, a sour expression on his sharp, dark face, his black eyes riveted on Hatfield.

"He's a shore-fire shot and a tophand with cows and horses," declared Wagner. "We used to work together along the Border."

"What yuh been up to lately?" inquired Robles.

HATFIELD repeated some of the personal history he had manufactured for Wagner's benefit. Nail's introduction had helped oil the slide and soon Robles nodded.

"Yuh're in, Hasty. I'll give yuh a whirl, but yuh'll have to live up to specifications, and yuh take yore orders from me, savvy?"

"Yes suh. I'm obliged."

"Run him over to the Sunday House, Nail," ordered Hammerhead. "I'll be along in a jiffy."

Battolini, he said, would be staying here at the Fish & Steer.

"I'll pick up my hoss at the stable, Nail," said the Ranger. "Be right with yuh."

This gave him an opportunity to get in touch with Buck Robertson. The youth had seen him come out of the saloon and was waiting for him at their quarters.

"I believe I've roped 'em, Buck," the

Ranger said. "I'm goin' with them now. You might watch where we go. I'll probably spend the night there."

Nail Wagner was sitting his mustang near the saloon hitchrail when Hatfield rode up on the golden sorrel. The bandit's head hung low; he was almost asleep. Hatfield nudged him and Wagner woke up and led the way. On the other side of town from the barn where the scrap over the prisoners had taken place stood a roomy "Sunday House," so called because ranchers who lived miles out of town made it a habit to spend week-ends in such places with their families. The two-storied building had an outside staircase, and a well with a bucket was in the side yard. Tethered mustangs stood around and saddles had been tossed on the porch.

Hatfield dropped rein before this Sunday House, leaving his gelding in the shadow of a spreading oak. Nail Wagner was too drunk to notice whether his companion unsaddled or not. In fact, he staggered inside without bothering to attend to his own horse. The wide door stood open and inside were a score of Robles' men. The bunks were all occupied and other men had spread blankets on the floor. Gear, boxes of ammunition and liquor were in evidence. From an iron hook sunk in the center of the ceiling beam hung a lamp, the wick turned down to soften the guttering light.

Here were the outlaw wounded, those who had been struck by bullets during the fighting against the Saddlebrand. A man with a punctured leg was snoring stertorously, his bandaged member propped on a box beside his bunk. Another man whose shoulder was swathed in linen lay on his uninjured side, and there were others busily caring for their injuries.

There was a stir in the front yard, then Hammerhead Robles came in with half a dozen gunhands who had trailed him over from the Fish & Steer.

"Find yoreself a corner, mate," Hammerhead said, to Hatfield. "That pard of yores has ossified himself again." For Nail Wagner, reaching a vacant space, had thrown himself down and was already asleep.

"*Gracias,* Boss." The Ranger nodded.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
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As he turned away the lamplight fell on his features as he pulled off his Stetson. Flat on his back in a bunk a few steps from Hatfield, a heavy fellow opened his eyes at all the commotion. There was a stained bandage around his massive head and his face was piggish, depraved.

Bulging, pale orbs fixed the Ranger. With a sudden shock, Hatfield recognized the shotgunner who had been at the stable from which they had snatched Laughlin and Gasca. And he remembered in a flash the wide-open eye which had regarded him as he had hustled to the lighted exit to help the captives away. At this instant Hatfield caught the flicker of answering recognition in the piggish man's gaze.

Hatfield whirled only to find the door blocked by Robles and his companions. Surrounded by deadly enemies who would kill him without compunction once they guessed his true identity, the Ranger felt he had only a breath in which to attempt flight.

At his jump, Hammerhead stared at him in astonishment. The two big fellows confronted one another while the piggish-faced outlaw opened his ugly trap and bawled:

"Plug him! He works for the Saddlebrand! He grabbed off Gasca and Laughlin!"

THE windows, while open, were too small for Hatfield to dive through them, and he would have to run a long gantlet if he tried for the rear exit of the Sunday House. He could never negotiate the main room, for once his back was turned they would fill him with lead. Still the Ranger had reached his cool decision even before the wounded bandit finished howling his accusation of the recruit.

A couple of Robles' men were in Hatfield's path. He swept them aside with a powerful surge, knocking one violently to the floor, shoving the other to the wall with a thud which shook the building.

But Hammerhead acted, too, with fiendish speed. Full of whisky though he was, Robles drew with practiced skill, his six-shooter clearing the oiled black holster and cocking under his thumb by its own weight as it rose. Other outlaws were diving for Colts, shotguns, anything handy. It would take a moment-fraction for Hatfield to check his lunge in order to pull a revolver and get off a shot. He might hit Robles, but the veteran gunhands in the place would riddle him.

It was all a matter of reaction, mental and physical. Hatfield dived straight at Robles without checking his speed. He heard the terrific roar of the heavy pistol in his ear and his left cheek was singed by flaming red-hot powder. Yet this stinging pain was a trifle compared to the ripping agony in his left hip as Robles' bullet tore through bunched flesh and muscle—clear through, thudding into a bandit standing in its line of flight.

"Oof!" The wind was forcibly driven from Robles' powerful lungs as Hatfield's lowered head, with all his weight behind it, hit the outlaw chief dead center.

The Ranger's neck nearly cracked. He was bent far over and his ferocious spring folded up Hammerhead, carrying him backward through the doorway. Hatfield landed on top. His Stetson crown was pushed in, but the taut chinstrap kept the hat on his head.

A couple of excited outlaws pulled trigger, unmindful of the fact that there was as much danger of killing their leader as of hitting this "Jim Hasty." The slugs whirled inches over the Ranger.

Bleeding from his wound and aware of the sapping of energy which follows such a hurt, Jim Hatfield gritted his teeth for a final effort. He pushed back his hat to clear his eyes, before which danced varicolored lights. It took all his great physical strength and the last ounce of his fighting will to keep moving. But he did it, rolling off Robles who had landed hard on his spine, the back of his skull cracking like a weighted lash end on the porch boards. Hammerhead's Stetson, also strapped to his bluefish jaw, was knocked awry and slid over his face. He was too stunned to work his limbs, lying there for precious instants which allowed Hatfield time to reach the side yard.

The Ranger was bent over with pain, but he kept going. Stabs of anguish made his whole frame shudder every time his left foot caught his weight but he knew that the hip bone, though it might be badly bruised, could not be broken or it would not have held him up.

A confused roaring came from the teeming Sunday House. Every man there

who could move and work his guns rushed for the door to shoot Hatfield before he could escape. He glanced back, face drawn, gray-green eyes glinting. From the shadows beyond, flashes and explosions told him that someone had opened fire on the Sunday House, and with a measure of grim relief recognized the cracking voice of Buck Robertson's carbine. Buck, following instructions to watch where he was led by Nail Wagner, must have been lurking in the darkness. He had heard the sudden uproar, had seen Hatfield come rocketing out. Now he was seeking to cover the Ranger's desperate play for freedom and life.

A shrill whistle issued from Hatfield's lips as he whipped up a Colt to throw lead back at the house. The crowd streaming from the lighted doorway faltered, feeling the pressure of the carbine and the six-shooter. Slugs missed the limping Ranger who reached the dark patch under a tree and, on the safe side of the trunk, put out his left hand to steady himself. His breath rasped in and out of his lungs and he was shaken.

He had left Goldy ready and saddled under a big oak not many paces away, and the welcome sound of the golden sorrel's hoofs told him that his signal was being answered. Goldy stopped close to him. The universe swam before the Ranger's vision but he had enough strength left to reach out and grasp the saddlehorn. Using his uninjured leg, he was able to push and heave himself up. But as the Ranger took his seat the movement spread his hip wound, and he sagged in the saddle.

CHAPTER VIII

Fugitives

FOR moments after Goldy started off, Jim Hatfield had no realization of what was happening. The next thing he knew, Buck Robertson was riding beside him on Old Heart 7, the chunky gray. The lights from the center of town were on their left and they were moving along a dirt street with darkened homes on either side.

"Jim! Jim!" Buck's voice was shrill with alarm. "Wake up. What's wrong with you? Did they get you?"

"I'm hit, Buck, and bad," muttered the officer. The jouncing and pressure on the injury, as Goldy pushed on, brought such agony that he knew he could not stand it for long.

"We better get right back to the livery stable, then. You most fell off a couple times."

"No. Robles will find us there."

Hatfield would have liked to reach the Saddlebrand where he could get treatment for his wound and lie up, but the ranch was too far away, and vicious killers were pressing at their heels. They would certainly hurry toward Terwilliger's, aware now that he was somehow connected with the cowman, since he had helped rescue Gasca and Laughlin.

Blasting pea whistles came from the Sunday House. That must be a signal, he thought, alerting all the gunhands stationed throughout Victoria, for he caught answering calls. Aware that he might black out at any moment, and that Buck would die trying to defend him, the Ranger desperately hunted a way out.

The issue was settled for him, so far as keeping on went. Not far ahead was a wide cross street. Shouts told Hatfield and Buck that some of the outlaws were hurrying along it, seeking the fugitive in the night.

"Come on, Buck. It's hide or give up."

The Ranger pulled rein, biting his lip and scrunched over to one side as he tried to spare his lacerated hip. His position threw the sorrel off-balance and would eventually cause Goldy to fall or go lame in a long run.

They cut through a lane between two homes. Pulling up for a moment, they heard the hunters calling to one another, looking for them in the streets. The lane led into a back way, and on this narrow path opened stables and barns.

"We better get inside pronto, Buck. Once they spot us we'll be finished, except for shootin' it out."

A large stable, surmounted by a cupola and with a hay mow, attracted the Ranger who knew he must stop moving. The front doors were padlocked, so they moved around to the dark side. A high-wheeled, one-horse cart, loaded with field cotton,

slanted there. Past it was an entrance fastened only by a wooden peg stuck in the hasp.

Buck got down and helped Hatfield. They could hear horses in the stalls. Hatfield leaned against the wall as Buck led Goldy and Old Heart Seven inside and shut the door.

They waited for a while, hearing shouts and whistling, the thudding of shod hoofs in all directions. Hammerhead Robles must have recovered quickly and rushed his gunslingers into action, searching for the spy who had roped him in. That the outlaws would hurriedly cover all the routes to the Saddlebrand there was no doubt.

"Can you make that ladder, Jim?" Buck asked anxiously.

"I'll have to," muttered the Ranger.

It was a nightmare, getting up the steep ladder leading to the loft. Buck boosted him and he finally made it, and lay down in loose hay. The youth went back to unsaddle their mounts. Soon he returned and squatted by the officer's side.

"I found two empty stalls, Jim, and put Goldy and Old Heart Seven in 'em. How do you feel now?"

"I'll be all right, Buck. Let's try to bandage this slice, then we'll get some shut-eye."

An emergency dressing was made from strips of a clean shirt the Ranger carried in his saddle-bag. Buck brought him his canteen and then Jim Hatfield rested, closing his eyes.

His was a fitful sleep, however. After a few brief naps the gray of dawn began seeping through the cracks in the upright boards forming the stable walls. He was weak from shock and loss of blood and it pained him to move his crusted, stiffened leg.

"I've got to make the Saddlebrand," he thought. "Terwilliger must be warned."

SNODGRASS' flaming arrow stunt would certainly work, would smoke the defenders out of the big house into the mouths of the guns of the attackers. Counters must be readied to defeat them, and anyway he could hardly remain in this stable indefinitely. The owner would quickly discover him and Buck.

There was much to be done in the fight against Napier Snodgrass. If he was to take a hand in that he had to have proper treatment for his wound so that it would heal quickly and permit him to resume operations.

The grayness became more definite and changed to white, then to red light as the sun rose over old Victoria. People in the town were rising, and the tantalizing odors of coffee coming to a boil, of frying ham and other appetizing foods, drifted into the loft. The sounds of voices and of doors opening reached the suffering Hatfield, but not Buck who was sound asleep at his side.

Half an hour more elapsed. Near Hatfield was the mow door through which the hay was pitched when it was brought in from the fields. The panel did not fit closely at the bottom and through the wide gap Hatfield could look down at the yard, see the cart and the approach to the rear of the barn. Footsteps told him that someone, probably the owner, was coming. He touched Buck gently awake.

Flattened out, the Ranger looked down at the man of around fifty who came to the downstairs door. He had a stocky body, and was clad in levis, gray shirt, an old felt hat, and hobnailed boots. His face was broad, his eyes wide-set, and there was gray in his wiry beard. He looked like a decent, sturdy citizen, and was whistling as he started about the morning chores.

Horses had to be watered and groomed, hay pitched. There were always many jobs to be seen to around such a place. The man wore no gun in sight. Evidently he had not the slightest idea that his precincts had been invaded during the night. As he opened the door and stepped inside Hatfield, keeping flat, pushed himself around so that he could look down through the square hole by the ladder.

He watched the bearded face. For a moment the stable owner, crossing toward the stalls, noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Then it suddenly registered with him that there were strange horses in two stalls. He stopped short and quit whistling, though he kept his lips puckered.

"Well, saddle my back!" Hatfield heard him exclaim.

He went slowly over and examined Goldy and Old Heart Seven closely although he took care not to get within reach of their shod hoofs in case one of the animals should kick out at him. He was

astonished and pushed back his hat thoughtfully. Men sometimes found a horse had been stolen during the night, but it was rare indeed for a man to discover extra mounts in his stable.

He turned and started hurriedly for the exit. Hatfield, a six-shooter held ready but out of sight from below, spoke to him.

"We're up here, mister. Don't make any ruckus."

Wide blue orbs fixed the Ranger's gray-green ones as the man stopped short again and glanced upward.

For several breaths there was silence. The stable owner, startled, was naturally fearful for his life.

"Don't shoot!" he said at last.

"I don't aim to, not unless you try for me first."

"I ain't armed. I reckon you're the feller they're huntin', eh?"

"Who said so?"

"A neighbor boy stopped by while we were eatin' breakfast and said there'd been a shootin' last night, that some folks were huntin' for a tall hombre who had done it."

"Huh! Do you know Hammerhead Frank Robles?"

The Texan below gulped and from the way his eyes twitched, Hatfield saw that he at least knew the outlaw by name.

"Well," Hatfield went on, "it was Robles' gunhands who caught my lead. I'm the one they're after. You can't be too fond of men like that. Are yuh, suh?"

"I sure ain't. They been in town too much lately and they're all-fired brassy, brawlin' and shovin' decent folks off the sidewalks and from the bars. But they're mean, too, and I'm not honin' for a fuss."

FROM the householder's appearance and talk, Hatfield could bracket him as an upright man. He decided to trust this fellow who had unknowingly provided a wounded Ranger with shelter. He took out the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers, and held it so the bearded citizen could see it. The badge was known by all Texans and the man who wore one was respected as highly as any man in the great state.

"Texas Ranger!"

"I'm here after cattle thieves, suh," explained Hatfield. "Last night I was slashed by a slug and I can't ride far. Not only that, but I'll be filled with bullets if I show myself around Victoria, with Robles and all his bunch watchin' for me."

"Stick here, then, and we'll feed you," said the man impulsively.

"No, I don't aim to put you in such peril, mister. Robles would kill you for givin' me a hand if he found out. But I have an idea. I've got a young pard with me they don't savvy. If you'll rent me that cart and a strong draught horse he can drive me to a place of safety."

"Whatever you say. The cart's loaded with cotton I was fetchin' to be ginned, but I was late with that salt batch and brought it home. I aimed to take it to be bailed after I'd done the chores."

"Where are your fields?"

"About four miles south of here." Owners of such small plantations often lived in town and worked on shares with several others. The cotton would be cleaned and baled at a community ginhouse. "You want me to dump it for you?"

"No. I'll need somethin' to hide under and that loose cotton will be just the ticket. My friend can drive. Buck, scramble down and lend a hand. Better run the cart inside so I can climb aboard without showin' myself in the yard."

The owner of the barn and nearby house said then that his name was Davis, and he promised to take care of their mounts until they could return for them. He brought food, hot coffee and fresh water, and insisted on cleansing and rebandaging the painful, crusted wound on Hatfield's stiffened hip.

The cart was pulled in. Davis led a powerful black draught horse from a stall, and got the harness hanging on wooden pegs.

They made a space at the bottom of the wagon and Hatfield, boosted in by Davis and Buck, lay face-down on a blanket. At his sides were placed the two carbines, and the cartridge belts with loaded Colts ready for action, for it was thought best that Buck carry no guns in sight. Then they artistically covered Hatfield with cotton bolls, arranging small spaces so he would have at least a limited view through the horizontal slats of the cart.

In the yard, Davis hitched the black horse in the shafts and Buck climbed to the board seat. In his levis, hunched over the reins, the youth would look like a

farm boy at work.

The Ranger thanked Davis who watched them off down the back lane. The wheels creaked and the heavy hoofs clopped on the road. It was a bright, warm day. The hidden officer could see some of the scenery as Buck headed for the highway to the Saddlebrand. People were moving on the walks, riders and vehicles passing. Before they had reached the outskirts of Victoria, Hatfield spied five of Robles' gunslingers. They were mounted and restlessly scouting the streets, but did not give the innocent-appearing slow cart a second glance.

More than ever the Ranger felt the necessity of warning Wallace Terwilliger of the impending assault to be directed in person by Napier Snodgrass. He knew he would be unable to ride much for a couple of days, but the Saddlebrand was the best place for him to lie up, and he was determined to be on hand when the killers struck. He had not learned the time for the attack, but preparations could not be made too soon.

The jolting hurt but, lying flat, he could stand it much better than ahorse. He closed his eyes and, warm under the cotton, dozed at times. Now and again horsemen passed them. Twice they were members of the bands led by Hammerhead Robles or Stiletto Joe Battolini. They would turn out to let the plodding cart by, give it a glance, and gallop on.

An hour out of Victoria they came to a crossroads, with an east-west road running inland from the Gulf. The Ranger started awake as clopping hoofs and voices of approaching riders, a large bunch, penetrated to him.

"Jim!" whispered Buck hoarsely. "Here come Hammerhead Robles and Battolini with a bunch of gunslingers! Looks like they been over toward Port Lavaca. What will I do?"

"Sit tight, Buck. If they ask you, say you're drivin' loads of cotton for your father."

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

LAND OF VIOLENT MEN

By JACKSON COLE

PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IX

Dangerous Trip

ROBLES, astride a fine long-legged gray gelding, pulled up, stopping the cart. Battolini and other fierce-faced, heavily armed bandits reined in behind the outlaw chief.

"'Mornin', sonny," said Hammerhead gruffly. "Where yuh reckon yuh're bound?"

"Pop told me to run this cotton to the ginhouse, suh." Buck spoke in a dull voice, leaning over the reins.

"Well, boy, we're a sheriff's posse, huntin' for a mean killer. If he catches yuh he'll skin yuh alive. He's a tall sidewinder, bigger'n I am, with black hair and a plumb hard face. He's wearin' brown leather chaps and a blue shirt. He totes double Colts. Have yuh seen him on the road?"

Buck pretended to digest the information. Then he asked:

"What kind of horse is he ridin', mister?"

"Could be most any color," answered Hammerhead. "He's a hoss thief, too, so he might have snatched the best cayuse in sight."

From this, Hatfield concluded they had not been able to see much of Goldy in the shadows outside the Sunday House. Nail Wagner had been so drunk he had failed to notice what Hatfield had ridden from the Fish & Steer to the rustler hangout.

"No, suh," said Buck. "I don't believe I've seen anybody much."

Robles was so close to the cart that he had put out a hand and steadied himself on the top side slat. Hatfield could have stuck out a finger and touched him. He could hear Hammerhead's stertorous breathing. Through little gaps in the packed bolls, he could see the raw fish visage of the savage crook, with his taut chinstrap bunching up his ugly jaw.

If the outlaw grew suspicious and stirred up the cotton, then all that would remain would be a last-ditch fight against impossible odds, with the Ranger and Buck nailed down in the cart. Hatfield was tensed, prepared to grasp his Colts, jump up and take along as many as pos-

sible before he died. If forced to do that, his first targets would be Hammerhead and Battolini.

For ticking seconds it hung that way. Hammerhead Robles seemed inclined to linger. He cocked a long leg up, reached for the "makin's," and fixed himself a quirly.

"Where's yore old man live, sonny?"

"About three miles from here, suh," Buck told him.

"Is he well-off?"

"Oh, no suh. It's been a right pore season so far. We're livin' on jowls and greens most of the while."

"Come on, Hammerhead," snapped Stiletto Joe impatiently. "Don't waste time on a dumb keed. We have much to do. We must hustle Francisco to Signor Nappy."

Hatfield could glimpse faces he had seen before during his fight against Snodgrass' power. He also saw several who did not have appearance to be range riders. The one Battolini indicated as Francisco sat a brown mule as though unaccustomed to a saddle, perching there like a fat spider. He wore sailor pants, a blue shirt, and a seaman's cap was on his black-haired head. His skin was swarthy, greasy. One gleaming shoebutton eye was alert, the other was covered by a black patch tied around his head. As Battolini mentioned his name he shifted his tobacco cud, grinned widely, exposing snagged teeth, and said cockily:

"*Si, si.* I get all the hombres you want, senores."

Though he might not be formidable on horseback, this Francisco exuded an air of evil strength. Hatfield guessed him to be some ally from the waterfront who could supply Snodgrass with enough fighters to make the bandits' strength overwhelming.

Hammerhead Robles had lighted his smoke and was puffing away. As Battolini called him, he shrugged.

"All right, Joe. Let's ride."

He swung away, his killers falling in behind him.

"Giddap, Blackie!" Buck clucked to the draught horse, slapping the loose reins on the broad, shiny back.

The animal resumed his plodding along the winding dirt road while Robles and Battolini made the turn north for Victoria, escorting Francisco for a conference with Snodgrass.

Buck kept on and finally took a road which would eventually lead to the Saddlebrand. By now Hatfield's wound was so painful he knew he must have fever, and was in dire need of care and rest.

In the afternoon, as they drew nearer to the big ranch, they were passed by a trio of Robles' scouts. As in the case of the others, however, these paid little heed to a thin youth driving a slow cart filled with raw cotton.

"Another mile and we'll be there, Buck," said the Ranger.

It had been a tense trip for both of them since they had been forced to travel at a snail's pace, trusting to guile and luck to see them through.

THE highway curved between gravel banks, fringed by brush, then cut through a patch of woods. Several horsemen suddenly spurred out at them, coming from just behind the cart and taking them by surprise.

At the same time a shrill whistle from one of them sent Duke Laughlin, on his buckskin gelding back in the ranch yard, hurrying over to the road. He cut through the trees and pushed down to the beaten dirt track. Five of Terwilliger's cowboys had surrounded a two-wheeled cart, drawn by a stolid black draught horse. Holding the reins was a bony youth of about sixteen, with tow hair straggling from under an old hat. Laughlin gave a quick, surprised exclamation.

"Say, Buck Robertson!" sang out the foreman of the Saddlebrand.

He had had only a vague glimpse of the Ranger's companion that night in Victoria when the two had saved Felipe Gasca and Duke from torture, and now Buck looked completely different in the clothing he wore to trick the outlaws as he brought the wagon through. But Hatfield had warned the ranch to be on the lookout for the lad, and the cowboys quickly guessed the boy on the box seat might be Hatfield's aide.

Laughlin drew up close to the cart.

"Duke!" said a muffled voice. The cotton bolls heaved and from the wilted plants appeared Jim Hatfield's head and shoulders as he pushed himself up with his hands.

Duke stared, hardly recognizing this disheveled apparition. Dirt smudged the Ranger's rugged face which was deeply lined with the suffering he had undergone from his wound. Bristly whiskers had caught bits of raw cotton and rubble, his black hair was touseled and covered with loose chaff.

Hatfield braced himself on the top rail of the cart side, biting his lip to hold back the agony, for the long hours he had spent stretched out under the load had stiffened his hip and leg.

"Hatfield!" exclaimed Laughlin. "What in blue blazes hit you, anyways?"

"One of Hammerhead Robles' best slugs," muttered the Ranger thickly. "Take us in, will you?"

He lay down in the cotton and, escorted by the cowboys, the cart shoved on to the Saddlebrand. Then Duke and other strong young fellows lifted down the big officer and helped him inside the house. They sat him down in a chair at the kitchen table.

Wallace Terwilliger hurried in to greet the Ranger. Ginny, Mrs. Terwilliger, and the Mexican women hovered around the wounded guest. He drank hot coffee, for a large pot was ready on the back of a stove, and introduced Buck to the Saddlebrand folks.

Laughlin remained at Hatfield's side, doing what he could for him.

"You need to sleep, Jim," insisted the foreman. "We better see to that slash you got, too."

The Ranger's left trouser leg was stiff with dried blood, his boot stained.

Dave and Billy, the sons of the household, took Buck in tow. At the Ranger's request, Terwilliger and Duke sat down as he gulped draughts of steaming coffee. In spite of his suffering, Hatfield kept cool and his calm voice held no trace of what he felt. But two red spots high in his cheeks told Laughlin that he must have some fever; the women knew it, as well. Still Hatfield refused to sleep until he had given them the vital warning.

The rancher and Duke listened gravely to his report.

"I've found out a lot about your trouble, Mr. Terwilliger," said the Ranger. "I traced Hammerhead Robles and that skull-faced Battolini. They work for a cuss called Snodgrass who thinks he's as smart as Napoleon, and acts like him all he can. He has big ambitions and is determined to snatch your ranch and crush you."

HE PAUSED to drink again. Terwilliger nodded.

"We figgered there might be someone steerin' Robles but didn't savvy just who it was. An hombre callin' himself Napier Snodgrass stopped here a couple of months ago, I recall. Said he was interested in model ranches so we showed him around, and fed him like we always do when folks come to call. He was a dumpy sidewinder, had a mean face when you looked close. He took snuff, and acted mighty haughty."

"That's the Indian, suh. Ordinarily Hammerhead Robles would be runnin' off cows and horses, hidin' out in the brakes from the law. Rustlin' is his line, stealin' cattle and horses and pluggin' a man now and then. You couldn't call him brilliant. I worked in with a gunhand who introduced me to Robles, but another outlaw I'd clipped in a scrap happened to recognize me. They plugged me at one of the Sunday Houses in Victoria. This Snodgrass gives Robles his orders."

"You're mighty good to help us, Ranger," said the rancher earnestly. "You're riskin' your life for us."

"That's all right. It's my business. We do everything possible for folks like you, suh. Good people are the backbone of Texas and we don't aim to let 'em be put upon."

Terwilliger's eyes were fixed on Hatfield's and Laughlin noticed how steadily the officer held the rancher's gaze. Then Wally Terwilliger looked down.

"He should turn in, suh," insisted Duke.

"In a jiffy," said the Ranger. "I got to warn you that what's already happened is only a sample of what's comin', Mr. Terwilliger. Snodgrass aims to shoot oil-soaked, burnin' arrows onto your roof and smoke you out. Then they'll drill you as you run out, blinded and chokin'. You must cut ports in your roofs so you can douse the fires while they're small. Have plenty of water and buckets inside and men ready for the job. Not only that, but Snodgrass, who will no doubt lead this all-out assault himself, has enlisted a bunch more gunslingers. Robles has picked up some, and they've got hold of

a dangerous rascal from Port Lavaca, a fat, dark-skinned hombre wearin' a patch over one eye, who seems to be in a position to furnish gunmen. They called him Francisco."

Laughlin and Terwilliger started. "That must be Francisco Pidal!" broke in Duke. "He's a mean customer, runs a waterfront dive over there. Among other things he handles stolen cows or anything else fetched him."

"Maybe Pidal's been gettin' the cattle the rustlers have stolen off my range," said Terwilliger.

"Well, now he's goin' to enlist with Snodgrass and furnish fighters," said the Ranger. "They may not be good range riders but they'll be tough on foot, and able to fire into you if you're staggerin' around in the smoke. You'll have to count on bracin' Pidal's wharf rats along with Robles' bandits, suh."

"Do you know when they're comin'?" inquired Terwilliger gravely.

"I haven't learned that yet, but I hope to. I want my horse brought here for that may mean life or death to me. Buck can hook back to Victoria as soon as he's rested and fed. He can spy out Snodgrass and when he sees they're ready to start, he can ride to us with the warnin'. Besides that, you'll keep your sentries on the roads, so Buck won't have to come all the way back to the ranch with Goldy. Maybe you'll send men after him. He can bring out my gelding and turn him over to your boys."

"I'll go, suh," said Duke Laughlin eagerly.

Terwilliger gave a short nod. They could see that Hatfield was completely exhausted now, done in by loss of blood and shock. The effort to inform them of their peril had been the last straw. They helped him into a side room to a couch where he stretched out. The retreat from Victoria had been a nightmare for the tall officer.

Hot water and clean cloths were brought. The terrible gash across Hatfield's hip was gently cleansed, and finally again bound with fresh strips of white linen. He had to sleep, though, to recover from the ordeal.

Laughlin was the last to leave the room, and when he tiptoed out Hatfield was already asleep, despite the gnawing pain in his leg. The ranch was well-guarded so that the Ranger, having brought his warning, could relax for a while—until Snodgrass launched his major attack.

DUKE LAUGHLIN strolled through the *hacienda*. He found that Dave and Billy Terwilliger had quickly established a bond with Buck Robertson, the Ranger's young comrade. The tow-haired lad from Austin had been plied with the choicest morsels, according to the lavish hospitality of the Texans.

Buck glanced inquiringly at Laughlin. He was anxious about Hatfield.

"He'll be all right, Buck," the foreman assured. "He's hit the hay. After you're rested he wants you to mosey on back to Victoria and stand watch there. I'll trail you and fetch his gelding horse."

"*Bueno.* I better get a little shut-eye, suh. Then I'll be ready to start for town. He'll need his war horse when the fightin' begins."

Laughlin was restless and uneasy, al-

[*Turn page*]

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though he took care not to betray it. He could sense a frightful struggle shaping up as Napier Snodgrass, said to be the sinister chief behind Hammerhead Robles and Battolini, made ready to spring upon his prey.

"Wonder why the cuss is so all-fired set on wipin' us out?" he mused.

He could understand the rustlers who stole valuable cattle and mustangs. The animals would bring spot cash in any market. He also knew there were many expensive things in the roomy house, yet these hardly seemed worth the wholesale gunplay, the danger and expense Snodgrass was incurring in his extensive operations.

For although Duke Laughlin had been at the Saddlebrand for several years and was engaged to the owner's daughter, he had no inkling that any mystery was connected with the great ranch.

CHAPTER X

Capture

LAUGHLIN met Ginny in the corridor as he was starting out, and felt a little better when he had held her for a moment in his arms and kissed her. Her violet eyes smiled up into his as she clung to him. Ginny was a courageous and intelligent girl, and would have liked to keep Duke from knowing how troubled she was. But she couldn't.

"Duke!" she said tremulously, "Are you going to Victoria with young Buck?"

"I reckon so, Ginny. But I don't aim to enter town. I'll just run close and wait till Buck leads out Hatfield's horse. It will be in the dark so there's nothin' to worry about." For her sake he spoke with more assurance than he felt.

"Couldn't one of the boys go instead? We need you here."

"Ginny," he said earnestly, "I wouldn't want to send another man when I can go myself."

She caught him up. "I thought so," she said quickly. "It is dangerous, that's why you're doing it. The last time you tried anything you and Senor Gasca were captured, and now they've nearly killed Jim Hatfield. They know you, and they know our brand. They'll see it on the horses you two are riding. Please don't go!"

Laughlin had that desperate feeling which seizes a man when the woman he loves seeks to keep him out of peril. His voice was soft as he answered her, but he could feel she was tense in his arms.

"You wouldn't like me much, Ginny, if I acted like a cold-footer. I wouldn't care for myself, either. I'll be careful. But it's hair in the butter right now, the situation is bad, and I've got to do everything I can to help your father."

She tore her eyes from his, gently pushing him away. She did not cry, but he was sure she wanted to. Ginny gave him a quick nod and left him, and he went on to the yard. A couple of Saddlebrand cowboys on guard duty there, but peace hovered over the Saddlebrand and it did not seem possible there could be any menace in such a beautiful, benign spot as this. Soft breezes wafted across the lovely valley of the Guadeloupe, and bunches of cows which Hammerhead Robles had not yet swept up grazed on the lush grasses. "But that's the kernel of it," thought Laughlin, leaning on the top rail of a corral to fix himself a quirly. "Every time yuh turn around, thieves are there."

Hammerhead Robles' depredations had made serious inroads on the Saddlebrand herds, although as yet Terwilliger and Duke could not estimate the extent of the damage since they were pinned down guarding home base.

There was endless work on such a ranch and most of it had to be done out on the range, but Wally Terwilliger had lately refused to let small groups of cowboys venture far away from the fortlike *hacienda*. Too many drygulchers and roving outlaw patrols were at large, ready to shoot them down. It did not take long for a spread to go to wrack and ruin under such circumstances. Mustangs and cows would wander away even if they were not stolen and sold over at Port Lavaca by Robles' miscreants.

The sun was low and reddening in the sky upriver, shadows of the wooded hills were lengthening over the land. The appetite-sharpening odors of cooking foods scented the air as Mexican women prepared the evening meal. Wranglers

were busy at the stables and around the corrals. The blacksmith was hitting a chunk of iron, shaping it as he desired. A couple of waddies were mending saddles, others were working on their mustangs, each man responsible for a string.

Wallace Terwilliger came along and stopped to speak with his foreman. His steady, dark-blue eyes riveted to Duke's and his ruddy, bearded face was grave. But Terwilliger showed no alarm. He was a trained soldier and he could face even death without panic.

"What do you think, Duke?" he asked quietly.

"I think, suh, we need to smash Robles and this Snodgrass, and pronto," replied Laughlin firmly. "We won't have any breeders left before long if we don't."

"Yes, we need to crush 'em. But accordin' to Hatfield's report, we'll be lucky if we can hold our own here at the ranch."

"Oughtn't we to send for Gasca and Lane, Boss? They can supply some fighters and they'd feel hurt if you didn't ask 'em."

"Hatfield says just warn 'em to be ready. After all, we don't savvy yet when the enemy will strike. And our neighbors have their own homes and herds to watch."

THE cart which had been loaned to the Ranger by Davis, the cotton grower, had been placed in an outlying shed along with the black draught horse. When it was feasible, the rig would be returned. When Buck rode for Victoria after dark, he must travel on a fast mount, with Duke on his trail to bring back Goldy for Hatfield.

Duke ate his evening meal with the family. Ginny was unusually silent. Now and then he would catch her looking at him. Buck Robertson and Hatfield both were sleeping in other wings of the building, making up for lost time. They would eat later.

After supper Laughlin smoked a cheroot with his employer in the saddle room. They drank a glass of Mexican wine together, and after a while they heard Dave and Billy talking with Buck, who had roused and was ready to start on his important mission. Buck had a youth's unfailing appetite. He had stuffed himself before turning in and now he ate another hearty meal.

A fast Saddlebrand mustang was picked out and saddled for Buck, while Laughlin made ready his buckskin. There were outriding sentinels circling the ranch in the night, alert for signs of the vicious raiders. A chunk of moon silvered the horizon and myriad stars glinted in the sky as Laughlin and Buck set out from the ranch, cutting across country toward a back trail with which the foreman was familiar. It would lead out to a dirt road that would take them to Victoria.

As the moon came up, the light grew better and they could move at a good pace. Both were silent, preferring to listen for possible enemies who might be lurking near the Saddlebrand rather than talk.

But as they pushed on they were not molested. The outlaw raiders seemed to have deserted the countryside, and boldly the two hit the highway and hurried on to Victoria. For a long while before reaching it they could see the settlement's glow in the sky. As they drew close, Buck spoke to his companion.

"You hang outside, Duke. It's safer for both of us. I'll go to Davis' stable and fetch out the sorrel to you."

A patch of woods just southwest of town, overlooking the road, would offer a good hiding place. Laughlin turned into it, dismounted, and watched Buck Robertson out of sight. The distinctive brand on the borrowed mustang could not be distinguished in the darkness. Buck would stick to byways as he went to the cotton grower's, and come back the same way, turning over Goldy and the Saddlebrand animal to Duke. Then he would ride his gray, Old Heart 7, back into Victoria and do some spy work, and be ready to rush to the ranch when the wholesale attack seemed imminent.

Faintly, Laughlin could hear music and other sounds of wassail coming from the center of the old town. Standing there in the blackness of the woods, holding his buckskin's rein, he listened for other noises which might herald the approach of trouble.

Suddenly he cocked his head. The *clop-clop* of hoofs came from his right. A band of riders was approaching.

He put a gentle hand over the buck-

skin's muzzle so that his horse would not whinny a welcome to the other horses. Quirly ends glowed ruby red in the night as the horsemen slid by at an easy pace, jogging in their leather. He thought there must be a score or so of them. One of them, Duke saw as the fellow turned his way as he inhaled his smoke, was a Robles man. Duke recognized the bewhiskered, red-eyed face of a rustler with whom he had fought on other occasions, so naturally the other riders were of the same stripe.

The foreman kept quiet, waiting for them to pass. They went on toward the town. Only a few minutes later Duke heard gunshots. This alarmed him for it was time Buck was coming back with the Ranger's gelding and the Saddlebrand mustang on which the youth had ridden to town. They might not know Hatfield's mount but they would certainly recognize that telltale mark proclaiming Terwilliger's ownership. They had run off too many cows and mustangs wearing the brand, and anyone riding or in possession of such an animal would be suspect. Buck had not wanted to endanger Davis by leaving the Saddlebrand horse at the cotton grower's home.

BUCK might be in dire peril, Laughlin feared, might have been captured or shot. He had to find out if those shots had anything to do with the lad. As he heard vague yells, following the explosions, he quickly led the buckskin out on the road, jumped to saddle and raced toward town.

He knew where Davis' place was, and headed for it. He galloped past a row of small houses on the outskirts and a street lamp glowed yellow, casting light across the road. The riders who had passed him when he was hiding in the woods had turned and were coming back at a swift pace. At their head rode Hammerhead Robles, and Stiletto Joe Battolini was with him. A stout man in a dark cloak and straight hat was riding between them on a powerful white mount. Startled, Laughlin realized the man was Napier Snodgrass. He had seen the fellow when Snodgrass had come to the Saddlebrand, no doubt to spy out Terwilliger's position.

Duke pulled rein but this very action drew their attention to him. There was no side street into which he might dart. The light showed him just as it did the outlaws—and they knew him!

"The Saddlebrand foreman!" roared Hammerhead Robles, whipping out a Colt with blinding speed.

He dug in his long-roweled spurs, spurting forward at Laughlin, who pivoted his horse on a dime and flashed back past the row of homes.

Lead whistled perilously close. Low over the buckskin and with his strong legs clinched to his beautiful silver-trimmed saddle, Duke glanced back, drawing a pistol to defend himself. Robles was ripping it up, yards out in front of the others who had taken up the chase and were ballyhooing like huntsmen close upon a running fox.

Laughlin answered with bullets, to dampen their ambition. But his main energies had to be devoted to guiding his galloping mount.

As soon as he reached the end of the houses he veered, but a board fence blocked him and he again swung south. They kept him in view, pouring bullets after him. He was on the road below the settlement now and a short distance ahead loomed the dark woods in which he had been concealed as he awaited Buck's return.

A red glow showed, coming toward him around the curve past the trees. A moving ruby flame caught his startled eye, for it seemed that the uneven blob of fire was traveling through the air by itself. Then he realized it was a pitch torch, carried by a horseman.

Duke drove on. It might be a single rider who was not an outlaw, and he could rush by without a clash. Then another torch hove into view and in the dancing light he saw that the highway was teeming with men astride horses, mules and donkeys. That they were not cowboys, their clothing and manner of riding plainly showed. Some wore battered hats or caps, others sailor rigs. Cutlasses and Navy revolvers glinted in the torchlight. Although they might not be expert at fighting from a saddle, they looked as though they could give a brutal account of themselves in a hand-to-hand struggle. Some wore beards, others were more or less shaven. Cruel eyes gleamed as they watched the foreman who was almost upon them.

"Pidal!" Hammerhead Frank Robles bellowed at the top of his mighty voice. "Stop that sidewinder!"

Laughlin saw a fat fellow with a black patch over one eye, near the front of the procession. He crouched on the back of his long-eared mule like a tarantula on a stick. In the desperate breath before he ripped his rein to swing aside, Duke knew the man was Francisco Pidal, chief of the waterfront thieves infesting Port Lavaca. Hatfield had warned the Saddlebrand that Snodgrass and Robles had probably enlisted Pidal's crew.

Pidal's yellowed teeth showed as he spurted forward, drawing his cutlass. Others in the motley band pulled revolvers. Laughlin tossed a couple of hasty slugs their way, but he knew his only chance lay in reaching the woods, in outriding them. The buckskin answered the sharp pull of the rein. The shod hoofs dug into the dirt, slid a bit, then caught hold.

CONFUSED shouting, cracking gunshots filled Laughlin's ears. He was trapped between Robles and Pidal, and the two bands rapidly approaching one another. He had reacted quickly yet the turning had taken vital instants. Hammerhead Robles had gained several yards, and the swing put Duke's buckskin broadside to the rustler leader.

Robles' heavy Colt was spitting flame and lead. The bank at the side of the road was treacherous, the foreman's gelding slipped. Laughlin felt the mount shudder under him and knew the gelding had been hit by one of Hammerhead's bullets.

He kicked one foot free, tried to clear the other.

He almost made it as the dying buckskin gallantly surged ahead, fighting to keep going.

As the mount fell Laughlin half jumped, was half flung off. For a moment his booted right toe clung in the tapped stirrup and he was twisted around in the air.

Then his foot snapped loose but the damage was done and he landed hard on the bank.

His head banged against a stone, blackness seized upon him and the world seemed to explode in his ears.

CHAPTER XI

Gunmen Gather

WHEN Duke Laughlin came to, he was lying flat on his back on the side of the highway. Men stood over him, and a pitch torch had been stuck in the ground a few paces away so a good light showed up the Robles and Pidal ruffians who crowded the road, laughing and talking and swapping smokes and bottles.

Pidal and Hammerhead Robles were on one side of the foreman, while Stiletto Joe Battolini and Napier Snodgrass stood on the other.

"He's waking up," said Snodgrass coldly, and stirred Duke with a sharp toe.

Snodgrass stood with his short, heavy legs spread wide and his arms folded. His chin rested on his breastbone and in the dancing ruby flame his face was as evil as any Duke Laughlin had ever looked upon. He was repulsive, thought Duke, repressing the kind of instinctive shudder one feels at seeing a loathsome reptile. The nearly lipless mouth was cruelly curved, and his eyes were venomous. One lock of dark hair fell from beneath the straight brim of his conservative hat.

He raised a chubby hand, gripping a quirt, and slashed Laughlin across the face with the leaded lash. It was as if he hated the Saddlebrand foreman with the utmost virulence, although the two had had but the slightest contact.

"Drat you, sir, you've made me a great deal of bother," snapped Snodgrass, and again cut Laughlin with the whip. "What are you doing in Victoria tonight?"

"I just run up for a look at the scenery, Mr. Snodgrass," growled Duke, braced against the sting of the quirt. This killer boss would never get any information out of him.

"Humbug! Stuff and nonsense. You intended to shoot me in the back, I suppose. Killer! Apache!" Blotches of color came up in Snodgrass' cheeks as his fury mounted. He ground his teeth and with a shrill cry leaped in, whipping back and forth across Duke Laughlin until he was gasping for breath.

Laughlin kept trying to rise, thinking only of getting at Snodgrass, but each time he moved Hammerhead Robles or Battolini would kick him down.

"Where are all your friends?" demanded Snodgrass, folding his arms and glowering down at the captive as his fury abated from sheer exhaustion.

Duke had no hope of mercy from a man like this, nor from Robles, Battolini or Pidal. Any one of them would kill without giving the matter a second thought. Nor did he want mercy from them. All he wanted at that moment was moral strength enough to show no fear, not to flinch as he was tortured. He prayed that Buck Robertson had not been taken but dared not ask anything since it might set them after the youth.

When he did not answer Snodgrass the quirt stung him again.

Francisco Pidal laughed heartily, vastly amused at the cruel play. He interspersed his laughter with a string of curses, the lusty oaths of the waterfront.

"Senor Pidal!" Snodgrass frowned, turning a baleful eye on the man. "Perhaps you have not been informed that I hate profanity. Control yourself."

Pidal's good eye blinked. Then he grinned. "*Bueno,* Senor Snodgrass. I cut off his ears for you." He waved his cutlass.

"No, Pidal, no."

Snodgrass' imperious manner at least impressed Pidal. Battolini whispered something to the man from the wharves. Pidal nodded and subsided. Snodgrass may have been merely testing him, to make certain that Pidal would obey orders.

Snodgrass turned away, extracting a snuffbox from an inner pocket. He took a pinch, sneezed twice, and wiped his face with a white silk kerchief. He stood in thought for a time, then began to talk again, watching Laughlin's drawn face, now covered by welts from the quirt slashes, to see the foreman's reactions to what he said.

"A beautiful girl, Terwilliger's daughter," he commented drawlingly. "I hope to know her better, sir, so I shall naturally see no harm comes to her."

In spite of all his resolutions Duke trembled with rage. He would joyfully have strangled Snodgrass at that instant for even daring to mention Ginny. It made him wild.

GATHERING all his remaining strength he suddenly leaped up and went for Snodgrass. But Robles, Battolini, Pidal and a couple of others seized him before he could do more than take one swing at their chief. Snodgrass stepped back with a spry agility which was surprising. Laughlin's fist hardly touched him and the powerful Robles ripped him back and flung him to earth once more.

"Tie his paws," commanded Snodgrass. "Bosh! I hoped he might give me some information. But *n'importe,* I don't need it, after all. Send a patrol through the town, though, Robles, to make sure Terwilliger isn't lurking near." He seemed now to ignore Laughlin.

"Shall I put a slug into this sidewinder?" asked Robles. "He got away from us before, yuh know, Nappy."

Snodgrass thought it over. "Not now. I have an idea. When we attack, he may come in handy as a shield. Or he may weaken after he's had a real dose of what he deserves. Truss him up, gag him. I'll see to him later. Pidal, we must make our final plans for the assault. I rode out to meet you for that purpose. It's best that you don't take your men into Victoria, but camp outside. And I also wish to review my troops. Come with me, please."

Snodgrass and Pidal retired a few paces, putting their heads together as they schemed. Desperately Duke Laughlin realized that they were making ready to assault the Saddlebrand with every available gunhand and pirate available—and here he was, helpless! From all indications the attack would be soon, too. He groaned in agony of spirit.

Hammerhead Robles and Battolini were giving him their attention then. With no light hand Robles fastened his ankles with lengths of rawhide while the skull-faced Italian carefully gagged him. The vicious rustler leader seemed to take joy in kneeing him, while Stiletto Joe slapped him resoundingly. His head swimming from the abuse, and the painful knowledge of how utterly helpless he was, Duke Laughlin could only hold on to what was left of life, and hope he could go to his death without flinching. He thought of

Ginny, of his friends at the Saddlebrand and prayed fervently that they would be able to resist the terrible killers who so soon would strike. . . .

The new day had come and Jim Hatfield, having slept through the night, roused to the familiar, homely sounds of a big ranch in the morning. Wranglers were at work outside, the cowboys were washing at the trough and in high spirits, joking and roughing one another as such young fellows always did. The smell of coffee, and of breakfast in preparation reached the Ranger's nostrils, making him keenly hungry, for he had eaten little since he had been wounded.

He stretched his left leg. It was stiff, and the bandage swathing his hip was awkward.

"I better lie up today," he muttered.

He hated to give Napier Snodgrass that much leeway, but another twenty-four hours would make a big difference toward a quick recovery.

The fever seemed to have left him, already, and he was certain there was no infection.

Dave, the oldest Terwilliger son, looked in at him.

"Howdy, suh! How do you feel?"

"A sight better, *gracias*. But I could do with a cup of coffee, Dave."

"I'll see to it pronto, suh."

Dave, tall and stalwart, hurried off, and came back with a pretty Mexican girl in a black dress with white apron, and with a jeweled comb in her raven hair. She was carrying a laden tray. Fruit and jam, home-made rolls and butter, fried ham and potatoes were there for the hungry Ranger.

The girl smiled and rolled her expressive eyes at him as he paid her a compliment in Spanish.

Hatfield polished off everything in sight, then reached for his tobacco sack and papers and rolled a quirly. He had just touched a match to it when Ginny Terwilliger stopped and tapped on his open door.

"Come in, ma'am," he called.

"Are you feeling better? Was breakfast all right? Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"I'm fine, and that really hit the spot, Miss Ginny. I couldn't hold even another drop of coffee."

GINNY smiled at him, but she seemed tense and he thought she looked wan.

"Is Duke back?" he inquired.

"No, he's not. He's late. Father sent some of the boys to ride toward Victoria and watch for him."

Hatfield had hit the nail on the head. Ginny was worried about Duke, and in fact he should have returned by dawn. But he did not want to increase her alarm.

"Probably he had to hang around a while and wait for Buck to fetch Goldy," he murmured. "I wouldn't worry. Duke has two horses to lead back and if he happened to see any of the rustlers he would have to hide until they were out of sight."

"I suppose so." She sighed. "Oh, here's Father."

Wallace Terwilliger entered to inquire about how his guest was feeling. Nothing, he said in answer to Hatfield's query, had yet been heard from the cowboys who had been despatched to meet Duke Laughlin. Ginny went out to help her mother around the house while Terwilliger pulled up a chair and sat down to chat with the Ranger.

"I ought to be in shape for work tomorrow, suh," said Hatfield with a confident smile. "I mend pretty easy. I've an idea we should hit Snodgrass before he's fully organized, for when he is he'll come for us. He's growin' stronger every day while we're not gainin' any power. If we could smash into Victoria in a surprise run I might arrest such ringleaders as Robles, Snodgrass and this Francisco Pidal, and break up the game at the start."

They spoke of how many fighting men the Saddlebrand could muster in a pinch, of arms and ammunition and strategy. Both argued that sometimes bold attack was the best defense.

The morning dragged on. In the heat of noon, several weary riders drifted home. They had no news of Duke Laughlin and had seen nothing of Robles and his gunhands although they had ventured within sight of Victoria. A hot yellow sun beat down on the land, but the thick adobes kept the *hacienda* cool, open windows in the patio and outer walls furnishing cross-ventilation. By late after-

noon all of the waddies had returned and the Saddlebrand was convinced that Duke Laughlin and perhaps Buck Robertson, too, had either been shot or had fallen into enemy hands.

As the shadows lengthened over the valley of the Guadeloupe, the Ranger got out of bed and tried his legs. The injured hip was as stiff as ever and it hurt when he put his weight on that side. But he could roll along after a fashion. He pulled on his boots and the clean riding clothes which had been thoughtfully provided for him, his own having been ruined in the fight with Hammerhead Robles and during his subsequent escape.

Terwilliger, who had been out for a couple of hours, watching from a high point for his foreman, came through the hall and paused at the door.

"So you're up, Ranger. Are you sure you can make it?"

"I reckon. I could use a stick to lean on, though, if you have one handy."

Terwilliger hurried off, soon returning with a thick cane fashioned by pleating rawhide around a steel core rod. The ferrule and handle were of heavy beaten silver with beautiful scrollwork on the metal. The cane was a masterpiece of its kind.

"My father made this," said the rancher. "I wish you'd keep it if you like it."

"*Gracias,* suh," said the Ranger, and added admiringly, "It's mighty handsome."

HATFIELD limped out into the yard. Men were working around, but a pall had fallen over the place since all seemed to realize that something must have happened to Duke Laughlin. The Ranger was anxious about Buck, too, but kept a poker face. It was no time to say anything that might add to a growing panic.

Ginny came to the table for the evening meal, and although the girl held herself proudly, Hatfield could see she was stricken with grief and fear. Billy and Dave Terwilliger were the only ones who seemed able to dodge the black shadow that was threatening to engulf the Saddlebrand.

The Ranger ate heartily of the good food that was set before him. He would be needing all the strength he could muster. He had had time to think, and he had learned something more about Napier Snodgrass, so now Hatfield wanted to have another confidential talk with Wallace Terwilliger. After supper the two were ensconced in the saddle room, cigars lighted and drinks handy. Beside the Ranger's armchair was the stick which had been given him.

Terwilliger was uneasy although he kept his eyes fixed on Hatfield's gray-green ones. Outside, dark had blanketed the world and armed guards rode the perimeter around the buildings while road sentinels covered key points. Terwilliger had lighted two large silver lamps, the yellow rays filling the saddle room. In the yard, lanterns hung on posts, and throughout the *hacienda* more lamps were burning.

Softly, as from a distance, Hatfield could hear a woman sobbing. Ginny, in her room, was grieving for the man she loved.

CHAPTER XII

Mystery

ALL Hatfield's suggestions as to the defense of the house had been carried out by Wallace Terwilliger to the letter. Ports had been made in the various roof sections, buckets and other fire-fighting equipment had been readied. There were two inside wells, one in the patio, the other in a wing adjoining the spacious kitchens.

In the saddle room lamplight gleamed on the silver of the saddles and other of the numerous art objects. Long windows opened onto the patio, and the heavy drapes at them could be drawn if so desired.

"We certainly appreciate what you're doin' for us, Ranger," said Terwilliger, after a silent moment.

"As I told you before, suh, it's my business. And I'm not the kind to force any man to tell me somethin' he aims to keep secret, Mr. Terwilliger." Hatfield spoke slowly, but with plain emphasis.

"What do you mean by that?" Terwilliger's eyes never moved from Hat-

field's face.

"From the start, when you told me what was goin' on in these parts, it seemed to me there must be somethin' more to it than just the stealin' of your stock. Now I'm convinced of it, after seein' Snodgrass and overhearin' some of the ideas he has."

Wallace Terwilliger, no longer able to hold his steady gaze, dropped his eyes. He rubbed one hand over the other.

"You're hidin' somethin' from me, suh," declared Hatfield bluntly. "Somethin' that Snodgrass knows—and which explains why he's so set on crushin' yuh."

Terwilliger's mouth was grim and he was frowning. He held himself tensely. It was obvious that he did not relish talk of this sort. Still, though, he seemed determined not to speak.

The Ranger picked up the handsome cane and fingered the handle. He rose and hobbled over to one of the ornamented saddles, caressing the beaten metal trimmings. Then he began to talk again, softly but loud enough for Terwilliger to hear each word.

"La Salle, the French explorer," he said, "built a fort he called Saint Louis about twenty miles southeast of Victoria, 'way back in sixteen-eighty-five. He set out from there, overland, to hunt for the Mississippi River, and passed through this vicinity. La Salle made three tries, say the historians, and on his last trip he was killed by his own men, who turned on him. I have no doubt you are familiar with all this Texas history?"

He paused and Terwilliger nodded but refused to meet his eyes.

"One of La Salle's officers," went on Hatfield, "while on a game hunt for the party, stumbled on a big find. He wrote about it to his wife in France, tellin' of a rich lode he'd discovered. But he died of fever on the Gulf coast before he could return and make his fortune. He had roughly charted it but few of his landmarks lasted long. Folks call that 'The Lost Frenchman Mine,' and thousands of hombres have hunted it. Of course, Texas is full of so-called 'lost' mines. Some have been located, others haven't, while a lot never existed at all. But this one—"

He limped back to his chair, picked up his cheroot and resumed smoking, watching Terwilliger. The rancher was staring at the Mexican mat. Hatfield patiently waited. When Terwilliger finally spoke, it was to make an apology.

"I'm mighty sorry, Ranger. I had no wish to deceive yuh. My reasons for keepin' quiet are good ones."

"They must be, suh. I know you're a fine citizen and that you've done nothin' wrong. And I swear on my honor as a Ranger that I'll never give away your secrets if you confide in me."

Terwilliger was deeply moved. He jumped up, and began pacing up and down, hands clasped behind him. After a while he sat down and now he held Hatfield's eyes.

"You're right, suh," he said firmly. "You're willin' to give your life for us and have proved it, and you *should* understand what all this is about. As you said, Snodgrass has guessed, which is why he's on my trail. I would have told you the first time we met, but we've never disclosed the secret to anybody outside our family.

"My father found the Lost Frenchman when he was a young fellow, and it's an

[*Turn page*]

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unbelievably rich lode. But Dad loved this country. He was already makin' all he wanted by ranchin', and if he needed anything extra he could always dig out some metal, take it to San Antonio and sell it, without folks savvyin' where he got it. He built our home here. He had seen what happened in other places when a minin' stampede began. Crowds would rush in, toughs and thieves, greedy speculators tryin' to do you out of your heart and soul. They would rip up everything as they flocked to the spot to fight over the treasure. He was determined not to let men wreck this beautiful range. Can you understand that, Ranger? Some people couldn't. They'd think only of the money they might get for the stuff."

HATFIELD nodded. There was deep respect in his eyes.

"Yes, I reckon I'd feel about the way your father did, Mr. Terwilliger. It would be a shame to ruin a fine homeland like this."

"I'm glad you agree, for that's the way I feel. Gasca and Lane do, too. They must have guessed about the mine, yet they have never tired to find it and have never talked about it. My father took what silver he required for his work and he supplied Gasca and other pards with as much as they could use. Now and again he'd make a run to San Antonio and when he came back he'd have the metal. But he had simply dug it out at night, cached it in a hill cave upriver a piece, then picked it up on his way home. His body was found not too far from that crevice where he had his cache and I'm convinced they killed him there and dumped him below to throw us off the trail."

"So that's the story!"

From what he had ferreted out for himself, Hatfield had deduced there must be some such mystery connected with the Saddlebrand, and the Lost Frenchman had seemed like a good bet, on a chance. And Terwilliger had fully confirmed this.

"How many savvy where yore mine lies?" he inquired.

"Far as I can say, I'm the only man in the world who could lead you to it, Ranger. The day I became of age, my father brought me into this room, locked the doors, and told me about it. He warned me to keep it under my hat and never give away our secret except to my own children. I've always done as he said because we love this range and our home here."

"You s'pose Napier Snodgrass has located that silver lode?"

"I doubt if he even guesses where it is," replied Terwilliger. The rancher seemed positive on this point. "I believe he aims to get his hands on me and torture the secret from me. Many would have tried to force my father to reveal it but they knew he would only have laughed at them, no matter what they did to him."

"I reckon Snodgrass, who's as sharp-minded as he is ornery, heard or read about the Lost Frenchman. Folks knew of the virgin silver your father used in his work. It's possible that Snodgrass connected the two. He came here, had a look-see for himself at the saddles and other stuff you have. Then he and his band must have watched your father, maybe for a long while, before they jumped him."

Terwilliger nodded. "They wouldn't be the first who tried to sneak up on the old man and trail him to his mine. As I said, there were many. Pop told me of several parties specifically who dogged him in the hope he'd lead 'em to the Lost Frenchman. He would soon catch on and then he would play tricks, runnin' around, makin' 'em believe he was headin' for the treasure. I know he kept several big nuggets in that crevice I mentioned, for a decoy. He was always able to take care of himself, till he met Snodgrass."

"You would practically swear that Snodgrass hasn't trailed you to your mine, suh?"

"Yes, Ranger. It's most a year since my father and I were in the Lost Frenchman. I helped him extract quite a bit of silver, and he'd slowed down a lot, didn't do as much art work as he used to when he was younger. I haven't been down there at all on my own."

"Snodgrass must count on forcin' the information out of you or out of someone close to you. But accordin' to what you tell me, you're the only person livin' who knows. It seems to me, suh, you're takin' a big risk. If anything happens to you, your own boys won't know the location of the Lost Frenchman."

Wallace Terwilliger thought it over. "Yes, you're right." He seemed to reach a decision, and he stood up. "Will you wait here? I'll be back pronto."

When the rancher returned, Dave and Billy were with him. The father shut and bolted the doors. He closed the long windows and drew the heavy drapes across them so no one could possibly see into the Saddle Room from outside. He spoke then to his sons, in a grave voice.

"Boys, I'm goin' to tell you a most vital secret. As you savvy, Ranger Hatfield came from Austin to save us, and I trust him as I would myself and as I do my sons. The Ranger has already sworn never to reveal what he has learned here. I want you both to give me your solemn oaths you'll always keep this under your hats. I promised my dad the same way, and that I'd tell only my eldest son, but after all that's happened and what's comin' at us, I feel he'd agree this way is best. I'm goin' to show you boys the famous Lost Frenchman silver mine. Roll up that rug and stow it on the other side of the room."

WONDERINGLY, the boys obeyed their father, then stood staring at him. Terwilliger kneeled to pick up a large iron ring set in the thick oak. The watching Hatfield could see the trap-door outlined in the floor as the rancher pulled on the ring. The heavy panel came up, rustily creaking on its hinges.

"Aw, Pop, that's just an old wine cellar!" exclaimed Billy, disappointedly. "We've been in there."

Terwilliger smiled. He picked up a lamp and led the way down the steep steps. The boys followed, the limping Ranger descending sideward to spare his stiffened hip. When he reached the bottom of the steps, the rancher stood on the stone-paved floor of a spacious underground chamber. Bottles of wine filled the high shelves lining all four sides, dust and cobwebs covering the glass which here and there dully glinted in the yellow rays. There were bins, and casks of liquor resting on wooden frames.

"Yes, boys, you've been down here and so have quite a few folks," said their father. "But you never even guessed you were within reachin' distance of the Lost Frenchman." He set down the lamp and approached a shelf section which looked like all the others. Reaching in, he unfastened a hidden catch and the shelves slowly swung out at his pull. "They all work the same way," he explained, looking back at the Ranger and his sons.

A blank wall confronted them, stained by cobwebs and dirt sanded from the adobe bricks. Terwilliger drew his knife and slid the blade through a faint crack. He removed several large adobes, enough for a man to squeeze through. A gaping hole could now be seen.

Dave brought over the lamp and Terwilliger, having climbed through, took it from his son and stood by as the three followed him. The passage was narrow and slanted down. The walls were of brown clay.

After some yards of progress the tunnel widened into a roomlike excavation. Terwilliger raised the lamp and held it high so the light would shine on the sides, and here were thick seams of silver, malleable, ductile metal. Hatfield had studied mining engineering before joining the Texas Rangers, and he could judge a lode. This one was extremely rich, with numerous wide veins disappearing into the earth at the terminus of the diggings.

"We never found the end of it," observed Terwilliger. "To tell you the truth we never tried, for there was always more than enough in sight."

"Your father hid it mighty cleverly," observed the Ranger.

"Didn't he? Who'd have thought of buildin' his home over the site? He did all the work himself to begin with."

"How about the wells you dug?" inquired Hatfield. "Did they bore into the silver?"

"No, suh. The wells are on the far side of the house. Father saw to that. The silver runs off from here, under the saddle room wing into the hill."

CHAPTER XIII

Warning

QUICKLY Dave and Billy moved around the mine. The air was stale

and warm, but it was dry. Before their wondering eyes lay a fortune for the digging out. When their curiosity was satisfied, all of them returned the way they had come. Terwilliger walled up the Lost Frenchman, locked the shelf section in position, and they climbed the steps to the saddle room. The boys left, and the two men resumed their conference.

"Snodgrass may not savvy where the mine is, Mr. Terwilliger," Hatfield said thoughtfully, "but if he burns down the house when he attacks, it would likely show up. He'll figure on either forcin' you to talk, or maybe he has an idea that if he can wreck you financially you will be forced to visit the mine to recoup. Runnin' off your stock, and then havin' his outlaws drive you from your home would pressure you. But you can take it from me that once Snodgrass locates the Lost Frenchman, he'll get rid of you pronto—and everybody else who might be dangerous to him. He'll forge deeds to your property and hold it by main force, kill those who oppose him. He's already shown he'll do anything to win."

Terwilliger agreed. "So you believe we should go for him and not wait for 'em to hit us here? I'm willin' to travel along with whatever you say. But we'll need every possible hand, plenty of guns and ammunition, as well as fast mounts. Gasca and Lane will lend as many fighters as they can. It will be a toss-up whether we catch Snodgrass before he has everything set, but if you believe it best we can try."

So it was left at that, and the two men broke up their conference without Hatfield ever having mentioned his own private troubles. But he was deeply worried and upset over Buck Robertson. He did not relish having to return to Austin and tell Anita her brother had been killed. And Duke Laughlin's fate, as well, gnawed at the Ranger. What could have happened to him?

Guarded by alert sentries, the Saddlebrand turned in for the night, with all hoping against hope that Laughlin and Buck might have somehow escaped, and might reach the ranch before morning. . . .

The Ranger awoke in the small hours. No hint of the coming dawn was yet showing in the eastern sky, but he rose and tried his leg. It was still stiff, but the rest had helped and he knew he could ride and fight, that he *must* or it would be too late. He pulled on his spurred boots, finished dressing, and strapped his Stetson to his head. Crossed cartridge belts finished off his outfit, with butts of the heavy Colts prominent in their oiled holsters.

He pinned his silver star on silver circle to his shirt pocket and slipped quietly into the hall. The Terwilligers were still sleeping. He strode through the corridors, crossed the patio and entered the kitchen wing. A Saddlebrand waddy just off night duty nodded to him and pointed at the coffee pot on the back of the stove. Cold meat and bread, hot coffee with canned milk and molasses, made a substantial breakfast and he stoked up, aware that he must keep his energy up to par.

In the yard were more watchers, and guttering lanterns were hanging from the poles. But there had been no word of Buck or Laughlin during the night.

"Mornin', Ranger," said Len Young, a waddy who had temporarily taken over Duke Laughlin's duties. "Everything's quiet, so far."

"It may not be for long, Len. How about a mustang? My own mount is missin'."

"Anything yuh wish." Terwilliger had given orders that Hatfield be given the run of the ranch, and the men now had been informed that the tall fellow was a Texas Ranger who was there to aid them.

Young led him to a long stable in which choice mounts were kept. The Ranger picked a mettled, long-legged black with a white star on his forehead. A fine saddle was cinched on and after a short round of bucking, which Hatfield's hip stood well enough, the black settled down.

The acting foreman also supplied him with a saddle socket for the carbine which had been brought from Davis' place in the cotton cart.

"I'm goin' to mosey toward Victoria, Len," said Hatfield, "and see what I can see. Have Senor Gasca and Mr. Lane showed up?"

"We had messengers from 'em, sayin' they'd be comin' pronto. Watch out for our mounted sentries. They won't shoot without challengin' first. Our password's 'Plenty.' Just answer when they call out."

"*Gracias.* I'll be back."

A PALL of danger hung over the Saddlebrand. And again grim anxiety as to the fate of Buck and Duke Laughlin gripped Hatfield as he moved off from the quiet ranch. It was not long before he was halted. From a brush clump came the call:

"Who's that!"

"Plenty. Plenty."

A cowboy, covered by a riding mate, came forth, checked him and passed him. He rode on, but was stopped twice before he had made a mile.

Now the star-studded sky, silvery from the moon, was paling ahead of him. Dawn was coming up over the Gulf. Soon he could make out details at a distance and he broke off the road, pushing up the slope toward a long ridge from which he might be able to see more of the country.

There was a winding trail up there and he could look over the beautiful Guadeloupe valley. As the light rapidly bettered, he could see the buildings of the Saddlebrand in the rear distance, with smoke issuing from the kitchen chimneys. Then he heard a couple of gunshots and peered around, halting the black by a rock ledge.

Riders swept into his field of vision. In the front somebody on a chunky gray was tearing along, leading another horse on a long rope.

Buck Robertson, astride Old Heart 7! And behind the youth was Goldy, the Ranger's own sorrel. Two pursuers, shooting now and then from the saddle, were spurring on Buck's trail.

"I'll soon stop that!" muttered the Ranger, pulling his carbine from its socket.

He brought the rifle to shoulder, took aim, allowing for the speed of the horsemen, and squeezed the trigger. The outlaw in front sagged and his mount veered and crashed.

They were two of Hammerhead Robles' bandits whom Hatfield had encountered in Victoria. He had no pity for such killers; they were trying to down Buck and would show the boy no mercy. The second man jerked rein when his companion was hit. Hatfield threw another slug his way and that was enough. With a shrill whoop, the gunslinger deserted and, whirling his mustang, pelted away from there, hurried by Hatfield's crashing carbine.

The Ranger was immensely relieved to see Buck. He sang out and pushed down the uneven slope. Buck waved and called and soon they met.

"Buck! Where you been? How about Duke?"

"They took Duke prisoner, Jim. I had to hide out in the woods." He told his story to the Ranger.

Buck had reached Davis' home in Victoria safely, he said, after leaving Laughlin. He had soon started out with Goldy in tow, and the Saddlebrand horse on which he had come to town, but the whole town had been swarming with outlaw killers by then. Nearing the spot where he was to meet Duke, he dared not approach. Gunshots, flaming torches, raucous shouts had warned him off. Forced back to the Davis place to hide, Buck had turned loose the Saddlebrand mustang and cached the spare saddle in the barn. He knew that possession of such a horse might ruin Davis, as well as betray the game.

"I hooked out later, Jim," he went on, "and spied around. Snodgrass and Robles met up with a big band led by that Francisco Pidal hombre. They joined forces and now they're movin' this way. I kept hopin' I could help Duke so I hung around, but I couldn't do a thing."

"Is he still alive?"

"I ain't certain. They beat him up a lot. By now they may have killed him."

Buck had finally left the Davis place with Goldy in tow. In some woods to the southwest of town Francisco Pidal and his water rats had been encamped, drinking and quarreling, killing time until the moment came to attack the Saddlebrand. They had nearly caught Buck. While they did not know just who he was, they would have been glad to take the valuable sorrel, and rob a passing traveler. Buck had hidden for hours before he had been able to proceed.

HE HAD made a long detour, then struck out just before dawn for the Saddlebrand. As the new day had come up over the range he had been sighted by the two outlaw scouts who had been chasing him when Hatfield had arrived. They had been well out ahead of the main force led by Napier Snodgrass,

Robles and Pidal.

"Let's ride back as we palaver, Buck," suggested Hatfield. "If Snodgrass is comin' we better hustle and get set."

Hatfield realized now that he must abandon the idea of striking at the enemy before Snodgrass was fully prepared. As it stood now, the ranchers must withstand the savage attack which was imminent.

Buck's young face was drawn, pale under his coating of tan, and his eyes showed strain and lack of sleep. The Ranger looked at him sympathetically.

"You've done a good job, boy," he complimented, and Buck grinned, for nothing pleased him more than such a commendation from the man he idealized.

The golden sorrel already had greeted Hatfield as a long-lost friend. The officer transferred from the black to Goldy, and they headed back for the Saddlebrand. Hatfield now could stand the jolting of a horse under him, with a tight bandage on his wound.

Keeping to the higher ground overlooking the river valley, the Ranger studied the terrain carefully with a view to future operations. He noted patches of woods and rocky breaks. Terwilliger's buildings stood on a rise commanding the view of the valley, but there were rough patches north and northeast of the house. While not within pistol shot, they could be used for cover and a heavy rifle would carry from the brush.

As they rode up one of the Saddlebrand waddies waved to them, recognizing the tall figure on the golden sorrel, and Buck on Old Heart 7. He called a cheery greeting. They rode on to the yard, where horsemen who had just arrived were unsaddling and seeing to their mounts.

Felipe Gasca, a wide grin on his broad face, his mustache working, rushed to embrace and greet the Ranger.

"Senor Majestico! Zey say yuh are Rangaire! How glad I am to see yuh!"

Bill Lane shook hands, with a quiet grin. Both of Terwilliger's neighbors had brought along as many fighters as they could, leaving only a couple of guards at their homes. Yet even with these additions, the Saddlebrand would be greatly outnumbered by Snodgrass, for his alliance with Francisco Pidal had doubled his "army."

Buck was worn out, hungry, and sleepy. They sent him off for food and rest while Terwilliger listened gravely to the Ranger's report.

"They'll soon be upon us, suh," Hatfield said soberly, "and we must make ready. They got Duke, all right. Buck's not certain whether he's dead or alive."

Dispositions had to be made and Terwilliger followed Hatfield's instructions explicitly. Outriders were called in, and penned mustangs near the buildings were turned loose so they would not easily fall into enemy hands.

Hatfield chose a dozen toughened young cowboys from among the volunteers. They were armed with extra Colts, with sawed-off shotguns and carbines, and mounted on the fastest horses.

"I don't aim to be pinned down, suh," the Ranger told Terwilliger. "I figure we can do you a lot of good if we're free to stab and annoy the gunhands. See those woods up there? We'll hide in 'em and wait for Snodgrass to come up." He pointed to trees and brush northwest of the buildings.

With everything set at the ranch, Hatfield mounted the golden sorrel and led his crew up the slope. The fabulous silver lode that was the cause of all the trouble was under them, but only the Ranger was aware of it. Working into the trees, they dismounted. Hatfield took his field-glasses and went to watch the approaches to the Saddlebrand, after taking precautions to guard his rear.

He kept sweeping the land, slowly, back and forth. After a while he saw some dust to the eastward, but not over the highway. A flock of swallows winged away in the sky, blood-red from the rising sun.

A Saddlebrand waddy hurried to him.

"Ranger! Half a dozen cusses are workin' in from the north! Looks like they're headin' for these woods."

HATFIELD trotted back, took a quick look.

"Get out of here pronto, boys!" he ordered sharply. "It's Hammerhead Robles, and a passel of his men."

He had glimpsed the savage rustler leader as Robles shoved toward the Saddlebrand. Behind him came more and more of his killers, swarming across the rough breaks of the ridge.

The cowboys led their mustangs off westward, hidden in the trees and by bulging rises. The Ranger accompanied them, but stopped at the edge of the brush.

"You boys hide beyond and keep quiet till you hear from me. I'm goin' to stick here for a while."

He dropped the sorrel's rein and crept back, finding a dense thicket in which he lay down flat. Robles and his bandits were entering the woods, and he could hear the sounds of their slow progress.

The Ranger, as quiet as the unmoving shrubbery which shielded him, but with his guns ready for action, peered through a small gap in the bushes. He could make out Hammerhead Robles and a knot of armed outlaws.

"Drop yore reins, boys," ordered Hammerhead. "This will make a good camp for us. We'll leave our heavy stuff here. I'm goin' to take a look-see below."

Afoot, for it was hard riding in the rocky woods, Robles went off with several of his men toward the south margin of the woods, from where he could look down on the ranch. More and more gunslingers pulled into the bivouac, directed by the first to arrive. Strapped to the backs of three horses were small casks which were unloaded. Hatfield also saw several long bows, with quivers of arrows, which Robles had brought along. He knew what these were for—to lob oil-soaked, burning brands on the roof of the *hacienda*.

The raiders had extra ammunition, he saw, and plenty of liquor and food. Blanket rolls, too, had been brought. They could conduct a siege, if need be!

CHAPTER XIV

Challenge

EVEN as the Ranger silently watched, Hammerhead Robles came back for his powerful horse.

"Nappy's comin'," he announced. "Didn't Jiggy show up yet with that cussed foreman?"

"Here they be now, Hammerhead," answered a bearded bandit.

"Well, check and make shore the joggin' hasn't loosened those rawhide cords. We'll need the sidewinder. He'll make a shield for one of us. They say Terwilliger's daughter is sweet on him, so they won't shoot into him."

Hammerhead Robles went off toward the margin of the woods to meet his chief. Several of the outlaws trailed Robles. Only four remained with the baggage that had been dumped in the woods. Two stragglers soon arrived, one leading a strong mule with the inert figure of a man secured across the saddle, head hanging down, arms and legs limp. From what he had heard, the Ranger concluded this must be Duke Laughlin. Hatless, his clothing ripped and stained, his wrists and ankles bound by tight strings, Duke seemed more dead than kicking.

The outlaw called "Jiggy" and another loosened the lariat which held Laughlin in position. Roughly, they pulled him off the mule, letting him fall hard. They rolled him over by spurning him with their sharp heels, kicking him in the slats for good measure and swearing at him. Then they squatted to drink and smoke, joining the small gathering who were watching Jiggy and a companion who had been detailed to guard Duke, whom Snodgrass intended using as bait. Tobacco smoke and profane talk fouled the shadowed woods, in spite of the fresh morning breeze that had sprung up.

Hatfield weighed the odds. Laughlin was obviously past helping himself. The foreman had been so abused that he was groggy, perhaps senseless by now. It was six to one against the Ranger, who was lame himself. He knew he could creep off, even hop along as far as Goldy if he had to, but if he went in after Laughlin at this moment it might end his play then and there.

Yet he knew the outlaws would kill Duke when they had finished with him. They would shoot him in savage pique if repulsed. And Ginny's pale, proud face was before his eyes, mutely appealing.

"Here goes," he thought. "I got to try, win or lose." The six-shooter hammer drew back under his thumb, and he sang out in a commanding, sharp voice:

"Reach! You're covered from all sides!"

The bold challenge sent panic streaking through outlaw hearts. Four of the

bandits instantly froze, their hands rising. Jiggy dug for his weapon, whirling to fire, but Hatfield threw a bullet at him and Jiggy flexed, his pistol driving its load into the earth. The Ranger's second shot knocked Jiggy's partner off his feet, then Hatfield pushed up from the ground with his free hand and crashed into the clearing.

Fearful eyes glimpsed him, saw the grim, rugged face of the man from Austin, his heavy Colt menacing them. Lawbreakers knew only too well the meaning of that silver star on silver circle.

"Texas Ranger!" gasped one of them, cowed by the very implication of it.

"You! Rise up and tie Laughlin across that mule! Pronto!"

There was no disobeying such a command and the indicated gunhand set to work.

Hatfield was only a few steps away, covering them. Jiggy and his partner groaned, stretched out where they had fallen.

The man of the law well knew that any instant more bandits might appear in overwhelming strength. The shots must have been heard. But the Ranger was cool, calculating. Without taking his eyes off the tense outlaws, he picked up a long Indian bow, and some of the bunched arrows whose heads had been swathed in absorbent cloth wrappings.

"Hook one of those casks on the horn, hombre," he snarled. There was a loop by which the little containers of oil might be easily hung from the saddlehorn.

This done under his gun, the bandit who had carried out his orders stepped back, his eyes rolling in alarm. Hatfield lurched sideward to catch the mule's lead-rope. He backed off, gritting his teeth against the stubborn ache in his left hip. They watched him, waiting for a chance to pull their weapons the instant he turned away.

Close to the clump of brush in which he had previously been hidden, he opened fire. The casks jumped, one after the other, as bullets slapped into them. Kerosene began flowing from the holes and split staves. He kept tight hold on the mule's rope but the animal did not become frightened as easily as a mettled horse would have done. The mustangs, however, began to dance, and several of them bolted, while the outlaws threw themselves flat, sure they would be the next targets. Somehow a spark was struck, perhaps from a dropped quirly. On the instant yellow flames danced up, then rolls of smoke, as the inflammable oil began to burn.

HATFIELD lunged past the bushes into the trees, with the mule following docilely behind him. He whistled shrilly, calling his sorrel, for even a slow jog was difficult with his hurt side. Ineffectual metal hunted him and he kept his own Colt talking, and switched to his spare when the cylinders of the first had been emptied.

He had not gone far when the golden gelding trotted to him. He swung into the saddle, pulling the mule after him.

Frantic yells from the men he had left in the clearing told him they were calling to Hammerhead Robles and his cohorts. But he quickly reached the margin of the woods, retreating toward the screened rises where he had ordered his picked crew to conceal themselves. As he broke into the clear, hidden from the house and from the eastern approaches by the trees and ground contours, he saw several Saddlebrand waddies emerging. They had heard the shooting and were uneasy about him.

He met them halfway to the house and gave his swift commands.

"Chick, you take Duke. Better run him to Gasca's where he'll be safe, for he's in no shape for a scrap. Keep the bow and arrows and the cask of oil. We may be able to use 'em ourselves. Hustle! The rest of you get back there and hide. I'll have plenty for you to do before long."

The cowboy, "Chick," seized the mule's leader and others grabbed the cask and the bow. The Ranger turned the sorrel down the slope toward the wide plateau on which the Saddlebrand buildings were set. He dared not falter. Neither pain nor danger would stop him now—nothing save death or a wound so crippling that he would be unable to move. The moment had come and with it the Ranger would drive to the end, bitter or sweet. The thrill of battle surged through his being.

He was still on higher ground over the *hacienda* as he came to a point where he could see past the woods. He gave them a wide berth since he knew outlaw gunmen were holed up in there. Smoke

columned over the trees from the fire he had started.

Hatfield kept moving so he would not offer a sitting target. He knew that to the eastward, Robles and Pidal had drawn up the main forces. The rustlers were on their mustangs, line after line of heavily armed, ferocious gunhands who would kill at order. The rabble from Port Lavaca had dismounted from the mules and plugs on which they had arrived, but they were now all the more deadly. On a mound in the center of them all sat the dumpy form of Napier Snodgrass.

"On a white horse," muttered the Ranger. "He feels like Napoleon reviewin' his troops, I s'pose."

Snodgrass was haranguing his hirelings, waving an arm now and then to emphasize his points. The rising sun glinted on Hatfield's Ranger emblem and, glimpsing that, Hammerhead Robles, who had sent a bunch of riders to find out what was wrong in the woods, recognized the tall man on the golden sorrel. Robles shouted something to Snodgrass, pointed, and spurred toward the Ranger. Bullets began singing from the trees, kicking up spurts of dust or winging through the warming air.

Hatfield turned and moved westward, watching back over his shoulder. Snodgrass signaled Robles who reluctantly dropped the chase and circled to rejoin the attackers. The Ranger slanted down and paused beside a rocky outcropping which protected him from the upper woods.

Pidal's men, who were not used to steady riding, remounted and, led by their one-eyed chief, came slowly toward Hatfield, but before reaching him Pidal angled downhill and the long column formed a half circle. Hammerhead Robles took his outlaws the other way and they drew a great ring around the ranch, just out of pistol range.

Stiletto Joe Battolini remained beside Snodgrass on the rise, from which the battle might be observed and directed. Evidently the casks of oil the Ranger had set afire were not the entire stock, and they had a couple of bows and some arrows left which had been brought along by Pidal's men. Two picked riders approached the *hacienda,* carrying long Indian bows. Matches were struck, touched to the oil-soaked ends, which began to burn. The arrows were launched, lobbed high into the air. Both landed on flat areas of the house roof and lay there with smoke rising from the points.

A rifle snapped from a window and one of the outlaws' mustangs leaped and fell, throwing the bowman, who did not wait to shoot again but ran with bowlegged, zigzagging gait for safety. The second arrow man sent off another flaming missile but hastily lost his enthusiasm when he heard lead from Terwilliger's marksmen. He ripped rein and galloped away.

SNODGRASS and the rest of the raiders watched for the little fires to take hold on the dry shingles of the roof. There was a howl of balked fury as the heads of cowboys appeared from the ports that had been cut in the housetop. Buckets of water, passed to them from below, were sloshed over the flames, and steam rose. Futile slugs tried for the fire fighters but when their task was accomplished they ducked back out of sight.

In their rage, the attackers threw up their weapons and sent a roaring volley at the *hacienda.* The explosions echoed in the hills, startling in its volume. But the thick adobe walls spurned the lead, and only bits of brick and metal flew off where the slugs struck.

Now the sharpshooters inside the Saddlebrand took careful aim. Rifles crackled and the missiles from long range weapons reached the assailants. More and more were hit and the ring hastily split into its human components as they departed for safer positions.

Hammerhead Robles and the patch-eyed Pidal trotted their horses over to confer with Snodgrass. The fire in the upper woods was diminishing now as the breeze blew it into the broken rocks.

Whistles shrilled and the outlaws slowly lined up in rough military formation before their leaders. Snodgrass began exhorting them, his short, fat arms working. The sun was turning from red to yellow.

When Snodgrass had finished this talk, his army swung and again spread out. They picked up speed as they rushed at the *hacienda,* in a mass charge designed to overawe the defenders. If enough reached the walls and smashed through some of the windows, it could mean the end of the Saddlebrand.

A brutal challenge roared in outlaw throats!

Jim Hatfield unshipped his carbine and raised it to his shoulder. Dust came up under the shod hoofs of rustler mustangs, while Pidal's dockrats kicked the sides of their running mules and plugs. Volley after volley banged from the bandit guns, with men aiming at such openings as windows and loop-holes.

The Ranger began to shoot then. He made a couple of hits, forcing killers to drop behind and limp off to nurse their injuries. But the great numbers involved made it impossible for him to do more than sting a few, and he figuratively held his breath as the rest closed in, seeking to overrun the Terwilligers' ranchhouse.

It was up to the cowboys inside now. The Ranger had prevented Snodgrass from setting the roofs afire and smoking out the defenders, he had managed to snatch back Duke Laughlin so that the foreman would not be used as an unwilling shield for another of Snodgrass' tricks, and without as yet disclosing the presence of his small but tough shock force, concealed above the battleground. He was saving them until he could throw those cowboys into a critical situation. It was too late to bring them up now, and in daylight they could accomplish little, head-on against such forces.

Some of the rustlers tore to the whitewashed walls, jumped down and, hugging the adobe, fired slantwise through the long windows. Pidal's bunch, slower moving, were being slashed by the steady fire from the Saddlebrand. Horses went down, screaming and rolling, their riders thudding in the dust. Over the roar of firearms, only the shrillest yells could be distinguished.

Pidal was so fat and such an excellent target that he took care to hang behind the men he urged to the frontal attack.

"I wonder if I could make it," thought the Ranger. He got down and went to his knee, taking steady aim. He squeezed trigger and Pidal jumped and glanced around at him. Then Hatfield corrected a bit and tried again. Pidal fell off his mount, which ambled away.

Hammerhead Robles was over on the far side as the confused clash of battle rose in the once peaceful air.

Then the Ranger drew deep a sigh of relief. The stinging Saddlebrand guns had stopped and turned the charge! Pidal's men were hurrying off and then Robles appeared, with his hard-riding killers racing after him. The gunslingers who had left their saddles at the walls had remounted and scurried off, some wounded. Two mustangs with empty saddles and dropped rein danced uneasily near the white expanse.

Snodgrass was infuriated. The shooting died away, and Hatfield could see the man on his white horse, telling off the men who had followed his lead, in the lull that had come as the dust and smoke slowly settled over the field.

But in spite of Snodgrass' orders and threats, the rank and file of his men refused to charge again, in the sunlight. Many dismounted, and flung themselves down to smoke or consult flasks they had brought from Victoria. After a time, Hammerhead Robles and six of his riders started straight toward the Ranger. As they picked up speed it was obvious they meant to run him down.

He swung the gelding. "Let's show 'em some runnin'," he murmured.

CHAPTER XV

Battle

BELOW the ridge running parallel with the Guadeloupe and marking the mile-wide valley's northern margin, the pastures were thick with curling grasses. Across this the powerful sorrel bounded, carrying the man who was his own friend, who was likewise friend to every Texan in distress—Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger.

Robles dug in his spurs, riding low over his black in hot pursuit. The owlhoot was a fine rider, and his horse was the best he could steal, so it was a spirited race, likely with life or death as the stakes. Once, glancing back, the Ranger saw the bright light scintillating on the silver trappings of Hammerhead's saddle.

"He's stolen Luke's hull!" shouted Hatfield, recognizing the handsome saddle. Old Man Terwilliger would turn over in his grave if he knew such a man as Robles

bestrode it.

Hammerhead was quirting his swift mustang desperately. He knew what he was up against now, since he had seen the badge the rider ahead was wearing. A Texas Ranger! Every outlaw in the West knew that emblem—and its meaning. He may have guessed who Hatfield was before he saw the badge, and he fully realized at this moment that his only hope was to down the badge-wearer—fast!

The halfdozen men Robles had selected to accompany him also rode fast horses, and for a time kept up. But one, then another, began to drop behind.

Hatfield led them on. Tantalizingly he kept just out of Colt range, and the jolting black Robles rode did not offer a steady base from which to shoot. Now and again he would make a try, but each time his lead fell short.

They pounded on across the grassy range at crazy speed, with the river below them and the serrated wooded ridge to their right. Hatfield glanced back over a hunched shoulder now and again, gauging the pursuit. He was convinced by now that Snodgrass would not try another daylight assault, and if he could draw Robles, the chief's most valuable aide, into his trap the little Napolean of the range would be seriously handicapped.

Though most of Hammerhead's outlaw aides had dropped out, two of them hung stubbornly on, fifty yards behind him. Not far head the river curved in toward the heights, and a gray stone tongue thrust toward the stream, narrowing the route.

"It's now or never!" the Ranger told the golden sorrel. He must not lead the bandits any farther up the stream for Gasca's lay in that direction, and Lane's spread was not too far away, either, with both ranches guarded only by skeleton forces.

Hatfield galloped around the bend, pulled up. Robles came roaring along after him, believing he was safe enough with his men at his horse's heels and the Colt he so well knew how to use in his hand.

Hatfield knew how fast Hammerhead was with his hardware. He had felt the tearing agony of metal from the outlaw's guns. And yet the Ranger could not fire even at Robles without giving him warning—unless attacked himself.

Robles ripped to a stop at sight of the Ranger, and the gun speed he showed was astounding. His revolver was ready, and even as Hatfield sang out to him, Hammerhead jerked it into position. The Ranger raised his own thumb then, realizing that his opponent meant to fight. The outlaw's sleek black mustang slewed around as the Ranger's gun crashed. Robles suddenly sagged, his sharklike body losing all volition, just as Hatfield felt the wind of the bandit leader's bullet past his head.

The Ranger raced on. He heard the drumming of hoofs, and roaring shouts. Robles' men were coming up. Robles slid from the silver saddle, but the black stood quiet, anchored by one of Hammerhead's feet which had been caught in the tapped stirrup.

Robles' boys drew up short, howling with fury as they saw what had happened to their leader. Their futile lead followed the fleeing Ranger, but as they dismounted to check on Hammerhead, he eased off and swung to watch from a distance. He could see them shaking their heads. Then they loaded the limp form over the black, and started back. He could tell by their actions that Robles was dead.

"We're cuttin' 'em down to size, Goldy," he muttered.

He waited, rolling a smoke, giving them time to draw out of his way. Then he rode slowly for the Saddlebrand. . . .

NIGHT had come when Jim Hatfield, on foot, peered down at the faint, twinkling lanterns marking the *hacienda.* Only the piping of insects could be heard in the stillness. The moon was slowly rising, its silver touching the slow current of the Guadeloupe

Behind the Ranger waited the dozen waddies he had kept in reserve throughout the afternoon's battle, during which Napier Snodgrass had camped in the shade, watching. Hatfield himself had rested, napped to regain his strength while his boys stood guard. He was sure that Snodgrass would try again under cover of the darkness.

As he watched now a flaming yellow thing looped high in the air, over the ranchhouse. Several more followed. They looked like meteors in the sky.

"Here we go, boys!" announced the Ranger. He limped to his gelding and settled himself in his leather seat.

Gunfire and shouting burst out instantaneously. The fighters inside the *hacienda* were returning the outlaw lead but their targets could not be seen so well. Nor could the Ranger, leading his eager band straight at the center of it all, get a comprehensive view in the night.

One of the oil-soaked arrows caught hold and flames danced from the shingles. Spurts marked blasting weapons.

"Stick with me!" warned Hatfield "I'll Rebel yell every so often, and you boys join in. Make 'em think we're an army."

They would have to chance being hit by bullets from the defenders inside the adobe walls. Picking up speed, they galloped downhill. Not far from the house they ran into bunches of the raiders, most of them dismounted. They veered, their Colts blazing, and drew off a bit. Following Hatfield's instructions one of the waddies had been saving several oil-soaked arrows which had been captured in the woods.

The Ranger lighted one, sent it winging into the air, but short, so it fell well out from the walls. He shot others at intervals, and the burning ends showed the dark figures of the assailants. In this light they could be picked off by the defenders, and made easy targets for Hatfield and his dozen cowboys as they went roaring around them, up and down, pistols blazing. Blood-curdling Rebel yells accented the gunfire, and the racket and confusion created was as effective as the stinging metal the cowboys threw.

Anxiously Hatfield glanced at the roof. Thank heavens, the men inside had managed to get the fire under control, passing up bucket after bucket through the ports. The arrows he had dropped, too, were burning down.

But even as he noted this he realized that the Snodgrass gunslingers had had enough. They were evaporating into the shadows, hurrying for their horses. Snodgrass could not control them for he was unable to see much of what was going on. As the Ranger and his blasting shock force made the circuit of the house, they came upon fewer and fewer of their foes, and soon the vicinity was deserted.

Hatfield checked up, making sure the raiders were actually in flight down the river road. Then he sang out to Terwilliger, and soon the rancher had joined him, with his own armed forces swarming after him from the *hacienda*.

"They're on the way, suh," reported the Texas Ranger. "Pidal and Robles are done in. Duke Laughlin is safe, and is restin' at Gasca's."

"Ranger!" Terwilliger grasped his hand, trying to find words to express his gratitude. "You've done it."

But Jim Hatfield was not done yet.

"Snodgrass is runnin', suh," he said hastily. "I've got to catch up with him. He'll move fast."

Terwilliger could see to the general pursuit, to cleaning up around the battlefield. The Ranger hurried after his man. . . .

Under the hanging lamp of the Fish & Steer bar, Stiletto Joe Battolini swung around with a snarl. It was late, but the bar was crowded. Battolini stood in a wide doorway connecting the saloon with the hotel section as he caught sight of the tall man who suddenly appeared.

"Drop it, Battolini!" called the Texas Ranger as he shoved forward.

But Battolini was like a savage watch dog defending his master. Looking past Stiletto Joe, Hatfield glimpsed Napier Snodgrass halfway up the stairs. The plotter for stolen wealth had just returned to Victoria, no doubt to pick up valuables in his rooms.

THE cadaverous-faced Italian crouched, his bony brown hand blurred by speed as he went for his knife. But the Ranger knew how dangerous such an antagonist could be. The needle-pointed stiletto glinted and sailed from Battolini's fingers, but Hatfield had got off his shot in time, and the blade dropped to the sawdust. The bullet knocked Battolini sprawling, driving through his right shoulder.

Snodgrass had turned on the steps, a snub-nosed derringer in his hand.

"Hold up, Napoleon!" shouted the Ranger.

Looking up into the vicious faces he saw that Snodgrass' eyes were sparking his full hate. Snodgrass tried for him, and the ball passed within a hair of the big officer. Then booming Ranger Colt echoes rolled through the building. Startled, stunned spectators saw the duel, one which was finished before a man could shift position.

A bluish hole showed in Snodgrass' pale

brow. He toppled, one foot on a step above the other, and slid down the stairs, his fat body lodging against the post. Smoking gun ready, the Ranger stepped over to make sure.

* * * * *

Captain McDowell listened with deep satisfaction to Hatfield's terse account.

"I already heard a lot more from Wally Terwilliger about what a great job yuh done for him," he announced. "Yuh saved this foreman's life, they say, and a bunch more, by downin' Snodgrass and Robles."

"*Gracias,* suh." Hatfield spoke softly, relaxed in his chair. He had laid up at the Saddlebrand for a couple of days, before heading back to headquarters, to rest his injured hip.

"Accordin' to Terwilliger," the Ranger chief went on with satisfaction,"nothin's too good for the Rangers, especially a certain one named Jim Hatfield. He sent the Governor a big donation to help out with the force's expenses, and that's all to the good. I understand there was a silver mine down there, which was what Snodgrass was after." McDowell paused and shot a sharp glance at his companion but Hatfield only shrugged. "Yuh savvy where it is?"

"Yes suh. But I gave my word never to tell the Saddlebrand's secret, Cap'n."

"*Bueno.*"

Buck Robertson was safely at home with his sister. The Saddlebrand had been relieved of the killing pressure placed upon it by Napier Snodgrass. But Texas still called. McDowell never had enough officers, and the huge Lone Star State, filled with riches coveted by evil-doers, must be policed.

The old captain rattled his papers, and cleared his throat. He had another problem, a tough one.

Soon Jim Hatfield was moving out again on the golden gelding, guns freshly loaded, contented as he carried the law to the far confines of the mighty commonwealth.

Jim Hatfield rides into the middle of a fence war involving a cattle king, nesters and farmers—and must do some fast thinking and faster gun work to avenge the death of a fellow Ranger while bringing peace to the Sundust Valley country in—

LAND OF VIOLENT MEN

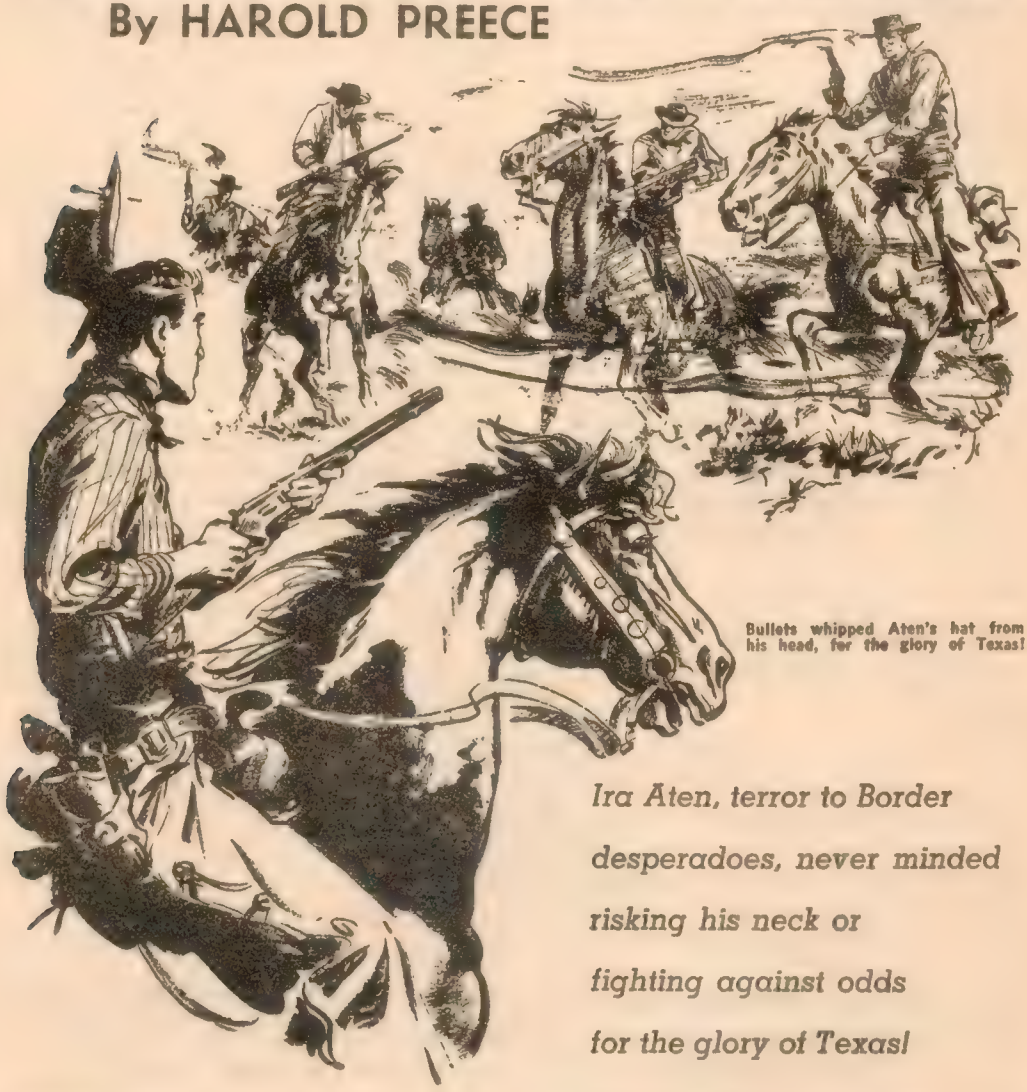
Another Exciting Complete Novel

By JACKSON COLE

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!

KNIGHT of the MESAS

By HAROLD PREECE



Bullets whipped Aten's hat from his head, for the glory of Texas!

Ira Aten, terror to Border desperadoes, never minded risking his neck or fighting against odds for the glory of Texas!

THE young fellow, who jogged leisurely across the sun-baked mesa, was swearing he'd taken on the tamest job in Texas.

He spat disgustedly at a horned toad looking at him mockingly from a little hillock of sand. Then his lean hand reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a bag of tobacco and some papers.

He was remembering how he'd raised that same hand, three weeks before, in the traditional oath of the Texas Ran-

A True Story of a FAMOUS TEXAS RANGER

gers. His fingers had itched for action right after he got out the last syllable of the oath.

But after twenty-one days in Company D. Ranger Private Ira Aten could write home only that he'd potted a couple of coyotes, mad with hydrophobia. That—and a promise to send his first pay check intact to his folks who needed it.

He was counting the days till pay day when his horse snorted violently at the acrid smell spreading across the mesa. The Ranger's nostrils twitched with recognition of the dampish forbidding odor.

"Coal oil," he muttered. "But honest men don't use it by the barrel to foul up the air when they kindle a fire."

Cruel Outlaw Gang

The next minute, his eye saw the thick grayish-black smoke rising toward the sultry Texas skies.

He touched his spurs to his pony. "Giddap, Coley," he commanded. "And we're headin' toward it." The stallion lit out in a long lope toward the belching smoke column, now casting an eerie pall over the mesas, that scorching day in the late 80's.

Aten and the horse were both coughing from the spreading fumes when they pulled up, ten minutes later, before the pile of burning rubble that had been the home of a peaceful border rancher. As the Ranger sprang from his pony, he saw the dazed, elderly woman who stood staring at ashes.

She reminded him of his own mother. The burnt house might have been the rambling, comfortable one built by his family who'd defied thieves and outlaws to pioneer in Texas.

He put his strong arm around the woman's shoulder. "Tell me what happened, granny?" he asked. He shook her gently when she made no answer. "No need to be scared of me. I'm Ira Aten, Texas Ranger."

Her wrinkled hand reached out and touched his badge for proof. "Horse thieves—killers," she mumbled. "Drove off our whole remuda, went into the barn, got out all the coal oil, and fired the house. Shot my husband, then—" She began crying hysterically and pointed toward the smoldering heap.

Ira Aten knew what she was trying to tell him. The bandits had thrown the rancher's corpse in the flames after they'd murdered him. By that savage token, he knew who the killers were.

They were the notorious Hellfire Boys—a swaggering gang of renegade Americans and renegade Mexicans preying impartially on decent settlers of both races along the Rio Grande. This was not the first man they'd cremated after they killed him.

The young Ranger's jaws set grimly like those of a steel trap. Tenderly, he lifted the old woman and placed her on his saddle. Then he climbed up behind and headed the pony toward a neighboring ranch that would offer her shelter. When he sat her down at the hacienda, he reached into his wallet, and handed her the lone greenback he'd been saving for tobacco money till he drew a second pay check.

His horse was lathered with sweat and sand when he pulled up at the Ranger camp on San Ambrosio Creek. But his commander, Captain L. P. Sieker, held up a hand that silenced the burning anger leaping from his tongue.

"A *vaquero* who got away told us all about it, Ira," Captain Sieker said quietly. "You're one o' six I'm detailing to give the Hellfire Boys a taste of hell. Get going!"

The six Rangers headed up a dim trail that branched off from the creek toward Old Mexico. Three seasoned men rode ahead as an advance guard to intercept the bandits before they crossed the Border. Ira Aten rode behind with another rookie, Private Ben Riley, and the Captain's younger brother, Frank Sieker. The rear guard moved more slowly because it had the care of the pack burros carrying grub and equipment for the detail.

They were three miles up the creek and eight miles above the Texas border town of Laredo when somebody shouted, "There go the outlaws!"

Bandits Fire at Rangers

Aten looked up and saw fifteen heavily-armed men driving the stolen horses over a hill just across the creek. He spurred his pony, and was the first man to land dripping on the opposite bank. Ben Riley and Frank Sieker were right behind him. But the older Rangers, crossing further upstream were bogged down in the mud.

The bandits began firing down on the

Rangers. Through a thick cloud of lead and powder, the three Texans charged up the steep hill. "We are Texas Rangers! Surrender!" yelled Ben Riley when they were half-way up.

His answer was a roar of shot which sent him sprawling from a gaping wound in his thigh. A clump of sparse timber broke his fall, and kept him from being plunged to death below. Crouching low in their saddles to dodge the flying lead, Aten and Sieker reached the top to face the human wolves bent on exterminating them.

Fifty yards separated pursuers from outlaws. The Rangers' guns missed fire. At a signal from the bandit chief, the outlaws concentrated their shots on Frank Sieker. Six slugs landed square in the youngster's chest, and he fell with a thud to the ground. Ira Aten had seen his first, but not his last, brother Ranger die in the saddle.

"Pick us off one by one, eh!" Aten yelled. "Well, blast you, if two of us go down fightin', three of you will, too!"

His fine horse leaped forward to the challenge. His carbine thundered. A bandit went plunging into a sea of maddened hoofs as the stolen horses galloped away in a mad stampede.

Now, he was one man fighting fourteen. The Hellfire Boys spurred forward to hem him in. The flashes of their blazing guns blinded his eyes till he could not see the sights on his carbine. His own shots missed. By some miracle, no bullet found its mark in his tall form. But his sombrero sailed into the air as a dozen bullets sent it flying from his head. The bandits were bunching in closer for the kill.

The bandits were accustomed only to the pitiful and futile resistance of little people. As Aten spurred forward again, the ring of death broke and the Hellfire Boys scattered.

Outlaws Are Captured

One lone man of the gang remained to stand his ground. Aten aimed at him. His shot knocked the rifle out of the outlaw's hand. The desperado was fleeing down the hill after his pardners as Aten pursued them toward a small settlement of Texas Mexicans, a mile below.

There, the Hellfire Boys were rounded up by citizens who'd taken courage from the magnificent example set by the Rangers. The stolen horses were found at the burned ranch where they'd headed instinctively after breaking loose from the thieves.

In the whole, gallant history of the Texas Rangers, only Jack Hays, the first great Ranger captain had matched Ira Aten, the rookie, in gallant, single-hand fighting. Grizzled old Texans who'd known Jack Hays swore that Ira Aten was a chip off the old block.

When Aten was quickly commissioned a sergeant, he realized that he'd joined the Rangers for some other reason than to help his family. Ever since seeing that stricken woman at the ranch, he knew he'd enlisted to protect the ever-advancing homes of Texas against outlaws. Every camp fire of every Ranger company was a fortress guarding the homes of every family in Texas. And the very first Ranger companies had been small, unofficial volunteer groups of family men who'd organized to protect their firesides against prowling red men and red white men.

Knowing what he was fighting for made him fight all the harder during the bitter years of border warfare that followed. Bandits stopped burning farmhouses and ranches as Aten, heading his detail of Company D, moved in a fury of vengeance up and down the border.

"That one Ranger's done us more harm than all the posses we snapped our fingers at," mourned one outlaw whom Aten had captured and started toward the gallows. "But I'd rather face ten sheriffs than meet up with him again."

Aten and his three men moved quickly into terror-stricken Dimmit County when a rustler ring, operating from across the Border, moved in and seized control. The county courthouse at Carrizo Springs was now dominated by men who looked the other way when Texas cattle were driven across the Rio Grande. Texas Mexicans who refused to vote for the candidates of the ring were beaten by armed men who invaded their homes or waylaid them along lonely trails.

Aten could sense the brooding atmosphere of fear in the county. Friendly Texas has no friendlier people than her million citizens of Mexican descent. But none dared murmur a friendly, greeting

to the Rangers as they walked down the streets of Carrizo Springs. None dared invite him to his home for tantalizing meals of chili and enchiladas. That irked Ira Aten most of all because he liked to be invited to the houses of his fellow-Texans.

By keeping his eyes open and his ears peeled, he learned that a dozen of the ring were due to cross the river on a certain day for a political council with their henchmen in Carrizo Springs.

Aten and his detail were waiting with cocked carbines on the south bank of the Rio Grande when the ring leaders pulled up on the north bank. Aten bluntly called attention to the carbine he held in one hand and the written agreement, pledging the gang to stay out of Dimmit County, which he held in the other.

"Sign this," he said referring to the paper, "or get this," he said nodding his head toward his carbine.

Aten Gets New Name

The desperadoes took just thirty seconds to make up their minds. They signed the paper. Next day, a border courier brought him congratulations from the Mexican Rurales, the counterpart of the Texas Rangers across the Rio Grande and, often, the comrades-in-arms of the Texans. Before Aten pulled his men out of Dimmit County, all of the assorted bad hombres who'd been denning up there under the protection of the ring, hotfooted it out of the Lone Star State.

And now, up and down the border, the home-loving folk had christened Ranger Ira Aten with a new name. They called him, in the poetic tongue of their fathers, *"El Hidalgo de las Mesas."* Translated into English, it meant "Knight of the Mesas." They'd given him the title as they sat around their firesides, speaking gratefully of how he'd saved their homes and their herds.

Austin, the capital, buzzed with the exploits of one of the greatest Rangers since Jack Hays. "He's my boy; I broke him in," Captain Sieker, now chief Ranger Quartermaster, boasted to Governor John Ireland. Governor Ireland was looking for a brave man to do a tough job. He brushed aside stuffy protocol which decreed that the chief executive could communicate with an individual Ranger only through his company commander.

In the summer of 1887, he sent Ranger Aten an urgent, personal letter, ordering him to track down a mean killer named Roberts who was leaving a trail of blood across Texas. Roberts, who'd ridden with Butch Cassidy's notorious Wild Bunch, had organized a gang of four that had lately slain a peaceful rancher named Brannigan near the Central Texas hill town of Fredericksburg. Three of the gang had been caught and were awaiting the rope. But it took somebody with more experience than a county deputy to get that main one still at large.

Aten had a hunch that the killer would go gunning next for rancher John Hughes at Liberty Hill, a hundred miles from Fredericksburg. Hughes had recently tracked down two horse thief kinsmen of Roberts to New Mexico and drilled them before recovering the ponies.

Aten was visiting at John Hughes cabin when Roberts rode up and fired into the house. Ranger and rancher followed the outlaw on a four-hundred-mile man hunt to the border of Indian Territory. They slew him as he was leaving the home of a disreputable girl friend.

After they'd disposed of Roberts, Ira Aten fulfilled a second assignment of Governor Ireland. He persuaded the fearless Hughes to join the Rangers, something that Governor Ireland had set his heart on ever since the tall rancher had wiped out the New Mexico horse thieves. Aten's recruit was destined to become one of the supremely heroic Ranger captains, and to serve in that invincible force of frontier fighters longer than any man in history.

Aten's lean frame was long since covered with bullet scars. His chest would have been covered with medals had Texas passed them out to her gallant defenders. He'd fought more thieves and killers than he could remember. Now, he was called on to fight a new enemy, which was outgrowth of new and changing times in Texas.

That new enemy was the East Texas fence cutting ring. The ring operated as a sinister secret society to destroy the hated fences beginning to encircle the open range. It had spread across the Brazos River from West Texas where it had used dynamite traps to blow fences, and cow-

boys riding fence, sky high.

Ira Aten had no love for fences or for the spiked barbed wire that cut the hides of fine steers into ribbons of bleeding flesh.

But he hated killers worse than he hated barbed wire..

Aten and Ranger Jim King went to Navarro County, center of the ring, disguised as itinerant cotton pickers seeking work.

They dragged heavy sacks in the fields till their backs ached and they swore they'd never even so much as wear cotton shirts again.

Rangers Do Undercover Work

But they penetrated into the top circles of the fence cutting fraternity. They even had to help clip barbed wire themselves to ward off suspicion directed against them as strangers. In the end, their notable detective work helped East Texas sheriffs move in and smash the closely—knit underground organization forever.

Whenever Ira Aten thought of his future, he saw himself still riding a Ranger pony till he went down in action or retiring on the meager Ranger pension when he was too old to ride. His heart might steer him toward a wife and a hearth. But duty steered him toward a different course. And that was protecting the wives and children and hearths of other men.

He did not know that one phase of his epochal career was ending and that a bright new one was beginning when he went to pacify feud-wracked Fort Bend County in August, 1889.

The shot-scarred Ranger met there a grave kindly girl who asked him simply and honestly, "You've kept burning the firesides of many a family in Texas, Ira? When are you going to light one for yourself?"

He felt less a gentleman because he could not answer the question till he'd talked some sense into those two rival factions tearing up the county—the Jaybirds and the Woodpeckers, as they called themselves.

He found that the two groups would agree on nothing except a day to fight it out. And it was one fight that even he couldn't stop. It ended with the Woodpecker county officials turning in forced resignations, and the Governor sending militiamen under a proclamation of martial law to disarm both factions.

The old sheriff had been killed in the battle. Ira Aten was the unanimous choice of everybody to take the job, since had no connection with either side. The girl helped him make up his mind to lay down the star of a Texas Ranger for the star of a Texas sheriff.

He married her and, in the fashion of good wives, she was soon building him a warm fireside. After he'd served four years as sheriff of Fort Bend County, he moved to the newly—organized county of Castro out in the Panhandle. But his wife had barely unpacked before his neighbors made him sheriff and sent him riding after a hard gang preying on their herds.

Within a month, he'd started an official Boot Hill to round up the rustlers he'd shot. In three months, he'd cleaned up the whole gang. Those who'd escaped funerals by surrendering were bound toward the Texas penintentiary in Huntsville.

Manager of the XIT

Afterwards, he became the manager of the world's biggest ranch—the three-million-acre XIT spread. Aten cleared that cattle empire of the rustler rings preying on it. At the same time, he won the affection and respect of the toughest bunch of cowhands of any ranch in the country.

He kept battling for the welfare of the West when he moved out to the Imperial Valley of California, and was elected to the Valley irrigation board. Thousands of homes in the new West now have electricity, thousands of fertile acres have been reclaimed from the desert, because Ira Aten and men like him fought to erect the great Boulder Dam.

The old fighter had become one of the famous and successful men of California when he died, not too many years ago. And still his memory stays green like the ripe range grass in Texas.

Men down there swear he'd have become one of the great Ranger captains of all time, had he stayed in the service. Which is another way of saying that the Knight of the Mesas was one of the greatest Rangers who ever cocked a Colt or sat a saddle.

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

"Go ahead, Gort," Scotty said

TWO-GUN TERROR

STEVE SCOTT eyed the bewhiskered old man staring at him through the front window of his saddle shop.

"Now what you suppose makes that old gent so fascinated with this face of mine?" Steve said.

Bud Nemo of the Rocking Y shook his head. "Never can tell what crazy old Hank'll do when he's seeing things."

"How come I haven't seen him before?"

"Reckon he's been off prospecting while you were setting up shop, Scotty," Bud said. He twanged his banjo. "You got something you'd like me to play on this plunk drum head?"

Scotty nodded. "Play that one about sleeping by the river."

Old Hank had gone to the north pane and was shading his eyes.

Since Steve Scott had hung out his sign

No man knew for sure whether Scotty was a gun hand or not—till the night the Wild Bunch cut loose

SCOTTY'S SADDLERY the shop had become a hangout for friendly talk.

Ans Wolston came in, eyed the old man outside.

"What's ailing Hank? Got another one of his queer spells?"

Scotty motioned Hank in. "Come have a good close look!"

Bud Nemo began to sing and Ans joined him in his shouting voice.

Old Hank peered in the door angrily. "How you expect a man to think with that noise going on?" He stared at the saddler.

"How do I look close up?" Scotty grinned.

"Can't never be sure when you see a fella face to face after seeing him last from under a table."

"Who was under the table?" Ans asked.

"Me," Hank said. "Keeping out of bullets' way. Say, who belongs to them ivory-stocked guns on the wall?"

A tall man came in carrying a black bag.

"Hi, Doc."

Doc Warren sat on the bench, got out his pipe. "How's everybody this morning?"

"You're interrupting something important," Hank said. "I was asking Scotty here about—"

Doc sucked on his pipe, didn't seem to hear old Hank. "That wild kid of the widow Gort's is back in town."

"Mighty shame about him," Ans said. "There's a lad can do anything. But he gets to be the durndest wild pup with drinking."

"Lightning on the draw," Nemo said. "And shoots straighter than a tight rope."

"That reminds me," Old Hank cut in. "Like I was saying. Them guns there, if they're yours, Scotty, answers my question. Yes, sir. I've seen you before all right. No doubt about it now for sure."

RINGO JACKSON stood in the doorway watching Hank with amusement. "You been away a coupla months prospecting this time, Hank. Did the sun get you a little more loco than usual?"

The boys laughed.

Ans said, "I hear you come back with a fortune in gold this time, Hank?"

Everybody laughed loudly.

Hank turned on them. "Shut up your howling mouths, you varmints. I ain't seeing things when I say I seen this man Scott before. You talk about young Ben Gort throwing down a gun and shooting? Say—"

"Easy," Ringo said. "Gort's riding this way with the wild bunch from up Gopher Gulch."

There was a clatter of hoofs outside and four riders reined up their horses at the rail.

The tall one with the thin black beard got down and his guns hugged his legs as he moved. He carried a bridle in his hand.

The shop grew silent as Ben Gort entered.

Gort looked over the counter at Scotty. "How long will it take to fix this busted bridle?"

Scotty looked the bridle over casually. "Tomorrow about this time?"

"I'll stop by," Gort said and started out.

Old Hank caught Gort's arm. "I was just saying, Ben," he said. "I was just saying nobody don't seem to know who this new saddler is. I wasn't sure till I seen his ivory-stocked six-guns hanging there on the wall. You think you're a fast man with a gun, Ben Gort. Say! Last time I seen this man in action—" Hank turned to Scotty. "Say, you was wearing a badge then. It was in the Eagle Saloon out Mustang River way. There was a wild bunch riding and this leader of the bunch came in and the shooting started. I slid under one of the tables and watched from there. You talk about shooting—with them same guns, too."

Scotty grinned. "That was a fight, wasn't it, Hank? Never expected to have so much trouble at the start. Usually when I'd walk into a place like that, things'd get calm, but not this time. My guns got so hot I had to put on my gloves to hold onto them."

Doc Warren sat sucking on his pipe and chuckling.

"I tell you," Hank barked, "it's a fact and no laughing matter. I tell you I was there!"

"Did I say you wasn't?" Scotty replied, looking serious.

Hank frowned, tried to think. "That shows you the man," he said, brightening. "In the middle of a fight like that, he even remembered me."

Ben Gort's mouth twisted sidewise as

he studied the situation.

"I'll stop by tomorrow," he said.

A thin little woman came by, paused.

"Oh, there are you, Ben," she said. "Would you take a fifty pound sack of flour home for me?"

"Sure, Mom," Ben Gort said. "Sure thing. Right now."

"That's the sweetest woman in town," Doc said, "and mother of that wild Indian. How do you figure things like that?"

"Now there," Hank said, "is something for you to do, Scotty. Put that young skunk in his place when he gets nasty."

"Forget it, will you?" Scotty said. "I'm a peaceful gent in the saddle business and I got no hankering for fight." He glanced out of the window at a buckboard that had drawn up and he tossed a piece of leather over a special sidesaddle to hide it.

Ringo said, "Scotty, your girl wants to see you."

"He's got eyes," Ans said.

Scotty went out, smiling.

Laura Vance said, "Dad asked me to bring down the extra set of harness for you to put in top shape again, Scotty."

Scotty smiled up at her. "Tell your dad I sure thank him for the business."

She laughed, said softly, "You don't think anybody else would get our business as long as you were here, do you?"

Her eyes were soft upon him, gently possessive.

"What time'll you be ready for the dance tomorrow night?" Scotty asked.

"Seven-thirty be all right?"

"I'll be there." He watched her back the team and buckboard into the street and head for the general store.

"You've got a wonderful girl there, Scotty," Doc said. "Where'd you two happen to meet?"

Scotty began shaping a piece of leather. "It was in Kansas City. Laura was going to school there and on this day we met, it was muddy as a sink hole. Laura was heading for the station in Kansas City and she had to cross the muddy street. She came holding her dress in one hand and her carpet bag in the other, picking her way on what solid spots she could find, dainty as a killdee. All at once the carpet valise broke open. Instead of mud and the smell of horse in the air there was little lace things all over and the air was full of French sachet.

"I helped her gather her things and then I carried the whole business, including her, to the station and saw her on the train. Later I came here and opened a saddle shop. I'd always wanted to settle down in a peaceful little town like this."

"What were you doing when you first met her?" Doc asked.

"Didn't you hear me say I knew him when he was the killingest hombre that ever drawed a gun?" Hank boasted.

"I'm asking you," Doc said.

The others hanging around leaned forward, listening, waiting.

Scotty grinned. "Now look, fellas. I said all I wanted was just to relax and not have to shoot anybody any more. I've hung up my guns."

Doc rose and knocked out his pipe. "Got to be going."

"Me, too," Hank said. "I got business a-plenty."

Scotty said, "I'd be obliged, Hank, if you didn't mention me."

Hank shuffled for the door. "Wouldn't say nothing for the world."

Ringo chuckled. "Only to the first one that'll buy him a drink."

Bud Nemo nodded. "I can see him now. He'll sidle up to the bar and say, 'I got news that'll blow your hat off.' And then somebody'll buy him a drink and he'll start talking about your gunning, Scotty."

Ans chuckled. "Scotty, Old Hank'll have you the most famous gun slinger ever to draw a gun by the time he gets through talking."

"I hope nobody believes him," Scotty said.

WHEN supper time came, Scotty went to his boarding house and Mother Murphy tagged him.

"What's this about you being a famous lawman?"

Little Jack Murphy said, "I heard, Scotty, you was first an outlaw and then you turned straight and became a lawman."

"You don't want to believe all you hear," Scotty said, chuckling.

Toward dessert, a gun went off in the evening air and there was some yelling. Jack leaned toward Scotty.

"You going to help Sheriff Rand keep this wild bunch down that Ben Gort's got started?"

Scotty shook his head. "Just call me Peaceful." He got up from the table. "I might be working a little late, Mrs. Murphy. Will you leave the door unlocked for me?"

He knew Laura wouldn't be in town tonight. He could work on her birthday present. He'd just begun on the side saddle when Doc came in.

"Miss Laura'll be mighty proud of that seat when you give it to her, Scotty," the doctor said.

"I sure hope so," Scotty said and worked on.

Doc sat silently puffing on his pipe for some time. It was obvious that he had something on his mind. Finally, he said:

"Ben Gort's got that wild bunch starting to tear for the coming weekend."

"I thought I heard some shooting and yelling while I was eating supper," Scotty said, casually.

"You know," Doc said, "Sheriff Rand isn't as young as he used to be. He's slowed up considerable. I wouldn't be surprised if Ben Gort could outdraw and outshoot him now, easy."

Scotty paused and turned. "This Ben Gort doesn't look like too bad a youngster."

"It's different when he's been drinking," Doc said. He puffed on for a time as if he were studying the situation. "I was talking to Sheriff Rand about a half hour ago. He was asking me if I knew whether what they're saying about you is true."

Scotty chuckled. "You folks are sure enough suckers for tall stories."

"You mean you aren't a lightning draw man and a dead shot, like Old Hank says you are?"

Scotty dropping his working hand and faced the doctor. "Look, Doc. I'd sprain my wrist trying to draw a six-gun. And I'd miss whatever I aimed at by a couple of yards."

Doc shook his head earnestly. "I'd hate to believe that, under the circumstances."

"Under what circumstances?"

"As I say, Sheriff Rand was wondering if you'd accept a deputy badge at least until the wild bunch got calmed down and under control."

"Doc, I've already told you—"

"Trouble is," Doc went on, ignoring his protest, "there isn't anybody else in the county that's really handy with a six-gun and it'll take somebody like that to scare these wild rannies into calming down."

"Doc, I—"

Warren was rising. "Just thought I'd mention it so you could think it over, Scotty. We all like you here. And we need you in the saddle business. But as things are shaping up, we need you a lot worse just now in the other capacity."

Doc hesitated in the doorway, knocked out his pipe against the outside door casing. "Good night."

Twice during the night as he worked, Scotty heard shots and yells down the street.

He went back to his boarding house late and went to bed but not to sleep. He lay worrying about the situation. He said, "Now what am I going to do?"

He didn't sleep much, got up early, had breakfast and went back to the shop.

The boys came drifting in now and then. It being Saturday, the crowd that hung around grew larger. It seemed that almost everybody he knew dropped in, or came by to glance at him through the saddlery window and move on.

Bud Nemo came in before noon with his banjo and started plunking out some tunes and Ans and Ringo sang a little. But the atmosphere about the shop had grown strained.

Old Hank came and sat on the doorstep listening and watching Scotty.

Finally Hank said, "I'd sure like to see them guns of yours keep the peace of this town, only this time I don't want to be around if you start throwing lead." He glanced at the others standing around. "You young squirts think you'd like to be in on a real lawman killing, don't you?"

Ringo and Bud grinned.

"You wouldn't like it if you'd seen it the way I seen it," Hank said. "From under a table, where you could look up into the faces of the men that was falling. Then you don't care what a man's been before, when he's slobbering blood and grunting like a beast—"

"Quiet," Scotty said. "You're turning my stomach and it's close to noon."

"You're a fine one to turn green," Hank said. "You being the one that done what I seen. Once is enough, I tell you. When you see—"

"Look," Scotty said. "Go down and get

yourself a couple of drinks, Hank. Here." He tossed two bits to him and Hank caught the coin.

THE others sat around silently after Hank had left. Scotty had felt it all morning. A sort of respectful and also fearful gaze. Not being so friendly and unhampered with him. Now there seemed to have grown up a barrier between him and the friends that came in to visit.

Now coming on noon, first one got up and left and then another. Scotty worked on alone. When the hands of his watch were at twelve, Sheriff Rand came thumping into his shop with a nod.

Rand was grey on top and shaggy. His shoulders were a little bent and the right-hand gun that he carried hung rather listlessly in his leg holster.

But Rand's manner was forthright enough. He tossed a deputy badge on the counter and eyed Scotty. "I'm hoping you'll pick it up and put it on, Scotty."

Scotty put down his awl and came over to face Rand.

"Sheriff," he said. "I've already told Doc Warren all about what kind of a gun hand I am. But maybe you won't believe that."

"Doc didn't," Rand said. "Doc thinks you're still trying to keep out of shooting people."

"I'm trying to make you understand," Scotty said. "I told Doc about meeting Laura Vance in Kansas City, and how that decided me to come here and go into the saddle business here. I don't reckon I told Doc everything because—well I guess I kind of liked being admired a little. I know it's silly, but that's why I brought those guns out and hung them up."

"They aren't your guns? I thought you told Hank they were."

"They're my guns all right now," Scotty said. "They came in the deal for my saddle shop in Kansas City. You see, I got sick and tired of just plodding along in the city without any excitement. About half the gents that came in for work to be done would tell about exciting things happening west of there. So when I saw Laura I decided to sell out to my cousin. He'd been wanting to come to the city and settle down and he'd learned the saddlery business when he was a kid the same as me."

"You were telling about the guns," Rand said.

"That's how I got his guns. I said I'd like a pair of guns like his and he told me to take them. He'd throw them in extra on the saddle shop deal in Kansas City. So I brought them here and hung them up and with that 'Scotty' carved on each ivory stock, Old Hank must have recognized them from the coast where my cousin was lawman and—"

"Scotty," Rand cut in, "I've just wired the coast where you were. I got the story of your career. They say nobody can outdraw or outshoot you. They say, just as you told Hank and some of the boys, that you quit so you could live a peaceful life and stop killing."

"I was just leading him on when I said that," Scotty said. "I was only fooling. I didn't think it would go this far."

"They just wired your description," Sheriff Rand said. "You fit the description perfectly."

"That's like I say," Scotty said. "My cousin Hal, he and I always got taken for each other, only you get us side by side and you could tell the difference without much trouble. We both looked like our grandfather Scott did when he was younger."

"Scotty, you know what I think?"

"I'm giving you the truth," Scotty said. "I'm molasses in January on the draw and I can't hit the whole side of a butte with a rifle, to say nothing of one of those six-guns."

"I think you're lying," Rand said. "And I think you got a lot of nerve coming into this town to settle down, figure to marry one of our nicest girls in the county, and then refuse to do your share in an emergency."

Sheriff Rand nodded at the deputy badge.

"I'm leaving that for you to think over. I hope you come to your senses." He walked out and down the boardwalk.

A couple of the hangers-on drifted in as the afternoon wore on but they drifted out again. Scotty was alone when Will Vance, Laura's father, came in after his harness.

"It's all ready for you, Mr. Vance," Scotty said.

Vance didn't smile, or show any sign of friendliness. He took the harness over his arm, paid for it and paused. His eyes shot to the guns on the wall.

"I've just been talking to Sheriff Rand," Vance said. He nodded at the deputy badge lying where the sheriff had tossed it. "What are you going to do about it, Scotty?"

"Mr. Vance," Scotty said. "I've already told the sheriff and Doc Warren how it is. I'm no fast-draw man. I'm no gun hand at all. It wouldn't be any use for me to—"

"Then you're bluffing and traveling under false colors with those famous guns hanging up there," Vance said. "In any event, I don't expect Laura will care about seeing you again." He left abruptly, got into his buckboard and turned the team around fast for home.

Scotty had started after him, to explain further. He gave it up and came back in his shop. Some of his gang were now watching him from down the street and the other side. They hung around in front of the hotel now.

He worked on alone during the rest of the afternoon. Those who came to get their saddles or harness, or to bring in other work to be done, talked very little. They came and went.

YOUNG JACK MURPHY came in as it began to grow dark.

"Here's the sandwiches you wanted from Mom so you wouldn't have to leave the shop to eat," he said. Then he stayed to watch Scotty work. A few minutes later he said, "It ain't true what they're saying about you, is it, Scotty? That you lost your nerve and that was why you quit being lawman out on the coast? That ain't so, is it?"

Scotty worked on, trying to think of an answer. He heard the kid playing with the deputy badge on the counter.

"Why don't you pin this on and show 'em? I hear the wild bunch is getting liquored right now down at the Palace Saloon. There's going to be trouble, sure."

"Jack," Scotty said, "I—"

It was almost dark now and Scotty turned as he heard shots coming from down the street. There were more shots and a couple of yells.

"There they go. See what I tell you?" Jack said.

"Look," Scotty said. "There's likely to be trouble. You better get on home before you get hurt."

"Not till I see you pin this deputy badge on," the kid said. He was coming toward Scotty with the badge. "Go on. Pin it on and I'll go home. I want to tell Ma and everybody that you ain't afraid."

There was more shooting and someone came running up the boardwalk.

"Go on home, I tell you." Scotty's voice was sharp and harsh.

Jack looked at him, a light of fear came into his eyes, then he braced himself. "No, sir. Not till you pin on that badge, Scotty."

"Oh, all right." Scotty was pinning on the badge. There was more shooting from below. "Now get out the back door before I—"

A horse squealed and took to running out in the street.

A familiar voice called, "Scotty! Scotty! You up here in your—"

Scotty pushed the kid out the back door, closed it, turned.

Old Hank came puffing in the front door of the saddle shop. He pointed down the street.

"I came up to warn you. The wild bunch—Ben Gort. Sheriff Rand—he was trying to tame down the boys and Gort challenged him to draw. They drawed together and Gort shot first by considerable. Shot the gun out of the sheriff's hand. Wounded his hand. Now Gort says he hears you're the law and he's coming up to have a show-down with you!"

Scotty took a quick look out of the window. He glanced at his guns. He was still trying to think.

"Get them guns on before this crazy kid trying to grow a black beard comes up and murders you in cold blood!"

"I keep telling you all, it wouldn't do any good," Scotty said. But all the time he was saying it, he was taking down his guns and belts and Old Hank was helping him buckle them around his waist.

"Now you look like your old self. Now you're ready for 'em, Scotty. This fight won't last more'n a few seconds, then you can go on back to peaceful living. Nobody won't ever bother you again."

Scotty heard the shouts and the shooting down the street. He took out his left-hand gun and spun the cylinder to make sure that it was loaded and ready. He took out the right-hand gun, did the same. He hefted the guns in his holster. They hung light and free at his finger tips.

He squared his shoulders and parted his

feet behind the counter.

"That star looks mighty fine on you, Scotty," Hank said. "Hey, you'll excuse me if I don't stay close by when the shooting starts."

Scotty nodded. His lips seemed to be sealed shut.

He moved so his back was close to the wall and yet there was room for his elbows to swing behind him in a draw. He stood waiting.

Hank started for the door but he was too late.

Ben Gort, swaggering as if the weight of his twin guns made him sway, came through the door. Behind Gort were three of his wild pals. They spread out at either side of him.

"I left a bridle here yesterday," Gort said. "You got it done?"

"Right here," Scotty said. He took it off a hook without turning his back and tossed it on the counter. "That'll be four bits."

Ben Gort leered at him. His eyes followed Scotty's face, ran down to the deputy star on his chest, fastened on the ivory-stocked guns and the eyes held there.

"Four bits," Scotty said again. "And while you've got your hand in your pocket, near your guns, you might as well take them out and lay those on the counter, too."

Ben Gort stopped half-way to his pocket with his right hand.

"Who you telling to leave his guns?"

"I'm telling you," Scotty said. He took a step to the left, spread his legs, stood like that with thumbs hooked in his gun belts. "I understand you shot the sheriff in a draw."

"Show him how you shoot a gun out of a lawman's hand," a ranny chirped. "Show him, Gort."

Scotty gave his head a short nod. "Go ahead if you want to chance it. Only I hope you don't, Gort, because I'm trying not to kill any more."

Gort was glaring. His head was down. He was sinking slightly in a crouch, ready to yank his guns.

OLD HANK came up from the back of the shop.

He said, "For the sake of your mother, Ben, don't go drawing with this man. I've seen him draw in a saloon full of men. Him against the pack. It ain't fun seeing what goes on when his guns start flashing. I was under a table last time. I got no hankering to see you get your gizzard blasted open and splashing on my clothes. I don't want to see these kids with you, their faces looking pained as they get their hearts blowed clean out of 'em."

"Shut up, you old fool," the blocky hand that was riding with the bunch said.

Gort swung an arm and knocked the old man back a yard. "Get out of my way!" Gort's face was going pale.

"Maybe you never heard how they sound, when Scotty shoots 'em," Hank barked, raising his voice. "Blood gurgling from their mouths, talking gibberish with their eyes rolling and wishing they'd never crossed Lawman Scott."

Doc Warren came striding in the door. "Hold on there!" he said. "Gort, stop acting like a locoed steer. You came out all right with the sheriff. It was an even draw and his hand'll get better. But this might be murder. You can't tell. And besides, I saw the telegram the sheriff got after checking on this man, Scott. He's lightning death, the wire said. Nobody's got a chance against him."

Scotty hadn't moved a muscle so far as anyone could see. His voice came out clear and hard in the sudden stillness.

"Ben Gort, I'm giving you one more chance. Turn your back, take out your guns and hand them to Doc. You're in no shape to be handling guns."

Gort was trembling slightly in the tension.

"Okay, Doc. You help him keep on living," Scotty said. "Step behind him, take his guns and lay them on the counter."

Doc Warren was white of face, too, but he moved as if he had been through worse than this.

Gort never moved. There was utter silence while Doc stepped behind him and Doc kept talking.

He said, "Why I remember when you were born, Ben. Cute little ticket you were. I'd sure hate to see you get a bullet between the eyes before you had a chance even to get your guns out."

Then Doc lifted out Gort's guns and Ben Gort lifted his arms some, his hands shaking as he raised them.

Doc laid the guns on the counter, muz-

zles toward the back of the room. He turned to the tall ranny of the wild bunch.

"You're next, son. Let's have your guns. No need anybody getting killed just for a little fun." He lifted those guns and the next rider and the next stepped up.

"Thanks, gentlemen," Scotty said. "You all come back Monday morning and pick up your shooting irons. And hereafter, you'll find this'll be a good place to check 'em before you start liquoring. Good night now, men. Ben, you can pick up your bridle when you come for your guns Monday."

Ben Gort turned and walked out of the door. The wild bunch followed him. Doc Warren closed the door.

Scotty took the first breath, it seemed to him, that he had taken in an hour. He nodded to Old Hank.

"Thanks for your help in talking them out of trouble."

Hank chuckled rather hysterically. "Wasn't nothing I done for you," he said. "You coulda handled things, only I got caught in here and I didn't want to see no more killing like I seen that other time. Makes me sick. I don't get over it for months. Can't sleep nights."

"Well you'll sleep tonight," Doc said, grinning and mopping the sweat that had collected on his forehead.

He closed the door on Hank and turned to Scotty.

"I hope I never see anything closer than that," he said.

"You did believe me, then, Doc, when I said I wasn't a gun hand? You knew I was bluffing?"

"I didn't believe you," Doc said. "So I telegraphed the man you said you sold your saddle shop to, your cousin. Look here what your cousin Hal wired back to me." He held out a telegram.

Steve Scott read:

STEVE SCOTT YOU REFER TO NO GUN HAND STOP DON'T LET HIM START DRAWING AND SHOOTING OR HE'LL BE MURDERED

HAL SCOTT

Scotty handed the telegram back to the doctor. "That's just what I kept telling you."

"Phew!" Doc whistled and shook his head. "We won't ever tell anybody about this but just the same you better practice up with those guns so if you ever do have to shoot you'll know how." Doc shook his head again, took a deep breath and blew it out. "I never saw such nerve in my life."

"Thanks," Scotty said. "But maybe you could have figured out something else to do under the circumstances."

Doc thought about it while he filled his pipe. He shook his head.

"No, I guess that was all you could do, Scotty, throw a bluff."

Scotty looked at his watch, unbuckled his gun belts.

"I'd better get started changing my clothes so I can get to the Vance place early enough for some explaining I've got to do. You see this afternoon Will Vance came by and said—"

"I know," Doc said. "He talked to me. But wait till he sees that badge on you. Then wait till I tell him how you faced down that wild bunch. He's liable to turn worse braggart about you than Old Hank."

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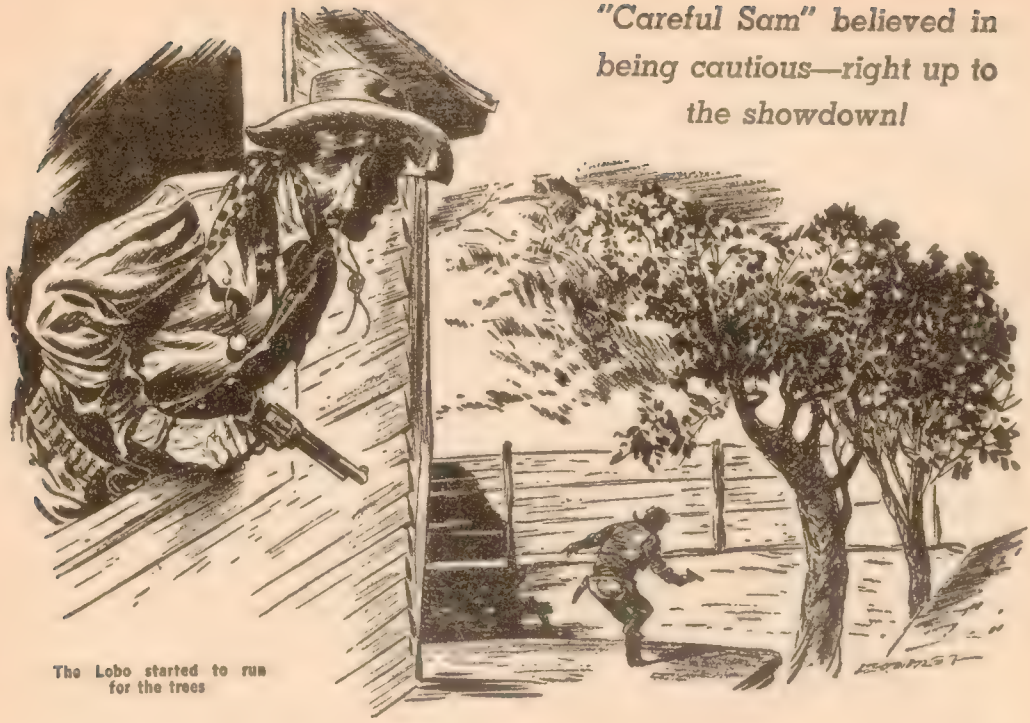
LONG SAM MAKES A STAKE

An Exciting Outlaw Littlejohn Story

By LEE BOND

PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES

"Careful Sam" believed in being cautious—right up to the showdown!



The Lobo started to run for the trees

TICKET TO BOOTHILL

By T. W. FORD

A BULL of a man with a walrus mustache, red-rimmed eyes and a crag of jaw, Sheriff Ron Tebbers, came up the hard-beaten path to the jailhouse. He squinted against the mid-morning sun and his weather-beaten face was grim with a thoughtful scowl. Looking out through one of the barred front windows of the office young "Careful Sam" Hickson, one of the deputies, blinked, then tongued his lips nervously. That thoughtful scowl on his boss' face always boded ill. But, more than that, the heavy-torsoed sheriff was hobbling on his cane again.

A couple of months ago he had received a ragged wound in the calf of his leg when he'd led a posse in the round-up of that rustling band over on White Skull Creek. It had been slow healing. But for the last ten days, a little before Careful Sam's fiasco in letting that horsethief escape, he had been limping around without benefit of cane or crutch. Now he had the cane back again.

Sam pulled open the heavy front door as Tebbers and Ben Gleason, mayor of Gopher Flats, came in. The sheriff grunted a "'morning" and hobbled over to his swivel chair behind the desk. Gleason greeted Careful Sam more cordially but he was frowning in thought too, in heavy thought. He hooked his long polelike body on a corner of the desk.

"Sure is a great chance to grab that sidewinder, Ron," he said. "But who's going to do it. You can't ride with that

leg of yours in that condition. Shucks!" He took off his hat to rake his gray hair.

Sam Hickson wondered what they were talking about. Tebbers cut his red-rimmed deep-sunken eyes Sam's way suddenly. "Tripped and fell down the stairs this morning, Sam. The doc came over and said I'd opened up the wound again. Feels pretty bad."

Before the deputy could answer, Ben Gleason added, "Sure comes at a bad time too. We got a tip early this morning on Lobo Hobbs. He's due to hole up in Devil's Notch sometime tonight. Doubling on his tracks, it seems."

Young Careful Sam felt his face tauten. Lobo Hobbs was an outlaw, a killer, a road agent, the breed that would bust a cap on you as quick and as offhandedly as he'd spit. But more than that he bore a fanatical hatred toward John Laws, boasting of the ones he'd put lead into. It was said he never put a notch in his gun butt when he dropped a lawman.

"That'd be like admitting they was human beings," he always said.

Last week he had held up a dancehall down in Elk Bench, another town in Gopher County. Then he'd jumped the State line before a posse could get near him. Now, it seemed he was back again, chased out of the next door State by a posse. And Devil's Notch was in Gopher County too. So the wanted man was in the sheriff's baliwick.

"We gotta get him somehow, Ben," the sheriff picked it up. He shifted his wounded leg, cut short a groan, and cursed. "Could send Cassoway, I suppose," he went on, naming his other deputy. "But I want an experienced man here in charge of the jail. We get some tough uns upstairs. Specially that Urson. His bunch might try to snake him out any night. I guess—" He broke off to bite the end off a cigar, couched it carefully in his mouth, and put a match to it.

CAREFUL SAM HICKSON could feel it coming. Despite the coolness of the young day sweat began to leak down his flat body beneath the checkered shirt and cowhide vest. He came away from the wall, a medium-sized man with a chunky face under brown hair with a cowlick that wouldn't stay down. His dark eyes were steady and direct. But the wide mouth as too full-lipped, too soft, a tipoff on his character.

"We gotta make a try for him somehow or we'll both be laughed out of office, Ron," the mayor said. "After all, he killed a man here up the valley two years back and got away."

"I guess," Ron Tebbers picked up his unfinished statement, "you'll have to go after him, Sam." And the deep-sunken eyes bit into the kid deputy. "Here are the facts," He checked them off on short spatulate fingers.

The tip was that Lobo Hobbs would slip into the Devil's Notch some time late that night. That he'd hole up above the General Store owned by a distant relative, a second cousin or something. The latter had three rooms above the store that he rented out. The Lobo would be in one of them. He would lay low till things cooled down some. But there had been this leak.

"We gotta grab our chance, Sam," Tebbers said gruffly. "Figure to leave here 'round about midnight. That'll bring you into the Notch right about dawn. This store has an outside stairs running up the side of the building to the second floor. You'll just have to slip in, find what room he's in—then jump him! And don't give him no break. If he goes for a gun just pump him full of lead. *Sabe?*"

Careful Sam Hickson nodded stiffly. He had his hands clenched behind his back so they couldn't see how they were shaking. He nodded stiffly.

"How big a posse will you send along with me?" he got out.

"Posse?" the sheriff snorted. "Why, you danged idiot, if we sent a posse down to the Notch, they'd be picked out the instant they hit that tough pueblo. And the word would be flashed along to Hobbs. He'd fly the coop in a split second." He leaned over the desk, jabbing a forefinger at Careful Sam. "It's a one-man job! And I'm picking you, Sam— Say, go down to the hash house and pick me up a cup of coffee, black. Plenty of sugar though. I don't feel so good, Sam."

Young Sam was glad to get out of there. The jail office had suddenly become hot and airless to him. He went down the main line, walking stiffly with the tension mounting in him. Deliberately he passed the eating place to hustle down to the corner and turn into the side road. Halfway

down it was the neat white cottage where Ty McCalley lived.

Ty had been his late dad's best friend, had served under him as a deputy when Sam's dad was sheriff. And when the elder Hickson had died, leaving Sam an orphan, it had been Ty McCalley who'd taken Sam as a boy into his own home and reared him. Ty had been much younger than Sam's dad. But he turned to him now as he would have turned to his father if he had been alive.

He knocked on the door of the white cottage. Ty's spinster sister, who kept house for him, opened the door. She shook her head when Sam asked for Ty. Her brother, she said, had gone up the Valley to visit some old cronies. His mouth twitched nervously.

"How's Ellen?" he asked, hoping she was home.

He had been sparking her for a year now. And she had half promised to marry him. It was Ellen who'd talked him into accepting the deputy job.

"You should follow in your dad's footsteps, Sam," she'd told him. "He was a great lawman. He'd want you to carry on for him."

Aunt Ella's eyes danced behind her steel-rimmed spectacles. "I'm sorry, Sam, but Ellen's gone to the dressmaker for a fitting."

He went slowly back to the hash house for Tebbers' coffee, forgetting to tell them not to put milk in it. . . .

BACK in the jail office, Ron Tebbers nodded slowly. "I know," he said to the mayor. "I hated to tell that windy to the younker about reinjuring my leg. And it's a tough test we're putting him to. But after that affair up there in Morgan's Gulch when he let that horsethief escape —well, we gotta find out about how much nerve he packs, that's all."

"Yes," Gleason agreed reluctantly. "But this assignment's enough to make even a veteran barbed-wire tough deputy chuck his badge into the ditch and take off for parts unknown."

Tebbers drew on his cigar. "Where in tarnation is my coffee? His dad, Wild Joe, was a great lawman, a regular spitting wildcat when he'd run his man to earth. 'Member the time he jumped the Breeder Bunch single handedly?"

"Uh-huh. He was a son of Satan when he talked with his shooting irons, a reg'lar lead-spiting wildcat."

"Sure. That's it. And his son should have the same blood in him once he finds himself, faces the big test. We gotta find out if he has. After all, I told you what the Doc said about my heart. I gotta rest. As I told you, I won't run for re-election. Cassoway's a good man but not smart enough. There's nobody else—'cept young Sam, provided he's got some of what his dad packed."

Ben Gleason heeled out his quirly. "I know, Ron. This is a tough county to rod the Law in. Let it once lose its grip and—" He shook his head. "But I still think it's a rough test for Sam."

The sheriff cut him off impatiently. "Nothing's going to happen. If he shows he's got the nerve to go in there and try for The Lobo, we'll know he's got the stuff inside him and we can put him up as the next sheriff. We know Lobo Hobbs is down south, over the state line. It just so happens that cousin of his does run the General Store over in the notch. We have Ty McCalley, the kid's best friend, in that back room upstairs. He'll throw a couple of shots at him, then surrender. That's all."

Gleason rubbed his long bony jaw. "But suppose some of these tough uns over there get ornery, Ron?"

"Like I told you, me and a couple of the house guards from Deuce Reilly's gambling joint will slip in there ahead of Sam and be ready to back him in case of trouble. It's simple. Shucks, where's my coffee!"

Careful Sam came in with the sheriff's cup of coffee. Tebbers noted how the deputy's hand shook so that the coffee slopped over the cup. . . .

It was late in the night, or rather early in the pre-dawn morning, as Careful Sam Hickson, the Gopher range behind him, rode across the baked barren flats toward the Shoshone Hills ahead. Already the stars were dimming and a bone-chilling wind whipped down out of the hills to betoken the coming day. He rounded a bend as the stage road bent northward, then jumped a hand to one of the .45's with the black butt inlaid with silver bands, one of his dad's old hoglegs. Coming the other way around the bend in the

thinning night was a dim figure.

"Hello, Sam!" It was the husky voice of Maverick Jones, a dealer in Reilly's place. "Hey, man what're you doing out this way?"

"Got to deliver a little message for the sheriff," Sam stalled him off. It was about the truth anyway.

"Well, if you're going through the Notch, keep your eyes peeled and your hand near your pistol butt. A card dealer up there—old friend of mine—dropped me a hint before I pulled stakes. The word is that Lobo Hobbs is slipping back in there sometime pronto. Mebbe tonight. So—"

"The sheriff heard something about that," Sam said stiffly. "Well, I got to be pushing." They passed, throwing a salute to each other.

Careful Sam's tongue was suddenly as stiff and dry as a piece of wood in his mouth. He had been trying intently not to brood about his errand. But it had to be faced. He muttered an epithet about Ron Tebbers under his breath as he pushed his paint horse a little faster. Sending him after The Lobo was as good as handing him a ticket to Boothill. He felt the deputy's badge in his pocket against his thigh. And he hated the thing.

HE COULDN'T help it. He knew his father had been a great John Law, admired and respected, a hero to his townsmen and held in awe by the riders of the owlhoot. And because he was Wild Joe's son, great things were expected of him even as a boy. He was supposed to be tough as a stove-dried boot toe. But, instead, he was a quiet one, retiring, never fighting in school unless he was forced to do it. It wasn't cowardice. But something about his dad had created a hatred of violence in him. Only because of Ellen, hoping to win her admiration, had he accepted the deputy's job.

The paint half shied as a jack rabbit scooted across the road and into the brush just ahead. The trail climbed now as they entered the lower hills, headed for the Devil's Notch, a pass that cut through to the Big Injun range on the other side.

He remembered his dad well, a tall rangy big-boned man half again his size. A man who roared in temper on a manhunt and who roared with mirth and good humor among his friends. Once, in his teens, Sam had seen his dad jump a man who started a fight in a whisky mill, pulling a knife. Wild Joe Hickson had felled him with a convenient redeye bottle, then picked the man off the floor and given him a bad beating. It had sickened young Sam, already dubbed "Careful Sam" because of his cautious ways. And then, sometimes when he had a few drinks, his dad would talk about how he'd smashed the Yellow Creek Bunch, killing two of them on the spot. Or how he got the Youngman brothers, killing one and sending the other to the gallows.

The older man was no braggart. He was simply expressing the triumphs of the Law that he worshipped. And then there was the time he had brought in a gunman charged with killing a dancehall girl who'd double-crossed him. The jury had sent him to the rope. And a little later, another gun passer, dying of a mortal wound up the line in Elcite, had confessed to the crime. That had finished it for Careful Sam. He got a set dislike for gunfighting, for killing. And he was plumb set against capital punishment.

"You got to pay off a killer in his own coin," his dad used to declare. " 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'—so the Good Book says."

Careful Sam didn't believe in that. Ahead, on the eastern horizon, an ochre band like a creeping tide was climbing up from the hills. Dawn wasn't far off. The trail beat over toward the Notch. Sam Hickson tongued his lips nervously. It wouldn't be long now.

He half guessed this was a test. After that fiasco up at Chella Canyon when he'd let that horsethief get away. The poor devil, wounded, had holed up in a cave in one side of the canyon. Sam had kept watch on the cave mouth for some fifteen hours till the sheriff and his posse came along. And the horsethief wasn't there any more. There had been a rear exit from the cave.

Ron Tebbers had peeled Sam's hide off. Said he should know this piece of country, having been raised here. Should have known that cave had another entrance. Sam had played stupid. But it hadn't been stupidity. He had known what evidence there was against the man and considered it dang skimpy. Had known too Gopher

was danged riled up because less than a month ago another horsethief had killed a man who'd tried to catch him. Any jury of Gopher Flats men would have brought in a verdict for a hempen necktie. Sam had let the man get away deliberately. And in so doing, he'd given them grounds to doubt his nerve. Now he was being put to the showdown test, he realized.

THE trail began to flatten out. Ahead, in the grayish rising light he sighted the shadowy outlines of some of the buildings on the strung-out main street of Devil's Notch in the pass. A coyote's quavering call came from somewhere off in the brush. Careful Sam's hair bristled on the back of his neck. Maybe that was the signal of some lookout.

His eyes cut around. To the south, the first rays of the sun fingered one of the higher hills. Then he walked his pony past a few hovels and shacks and into the main street. There was a paint-peeling blacksmith's barn. Further on, a drunk snored on the steps of a closed-up honky tonk. And a little ahead, on the other side of the street, there was the big sign spiking out at right angles from a store front that proclaimed: HARRY YARROW — GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

He slid out of the kak stiffly. His legs were wooden stilts that didn't belong to him. The touch of the silver-banded gun butts was like a cold shock to his sweating hands. Crossing the street, he went into the alley on one side of the store. There was no outside staircase on that side. He walked around behind it as the light heightened in the murky dawn. The day was going to be one of those scorchers. There was practically no backyard. For the side of the pass ran down, ending in a big hummock close to the building, rising almost to the height of the second story.

The other side and there was the outdoor stairway. He fought off nausea for a moment.

"Yeah, a ticket to Boothill," he muttered.

The Lobo—he wouldn't have a chance of outgunning him. His legs wanted to take him away from there. Take him to that saddle and let him ride out of Gopher County never to return. Then he thought of Ellen. And of his dad. And he went up the stairs slowly to the second floor where the window panes were already taking on a sickly yellowish hue from the first rays of the mounting sun. He stood on the small platform a moment. Then he reached for the door knob. There was the faint sound of a thump from inside, a thump like a body falling.

To his surprise, the door wasn't locked. He stepped inside. Walked forward a few paces to find himself at the head of a narrow hall that ran rearward. He passed two rooms on his left. In each case the door was wide open, indicating no tenants there. He was walking like a cat, gingerly, softly. There was only the back room at the end of the hall, the door facing him. It would be logical for Lobo Hobbs to take that room, he realized. A gun out, he tried the door. Again he was surprised. It wasn't locked. He tried to listen against the panel for some telltale sound. It was as still as an empty church.

He gulped a big chunk of air and flung the door open. His gaze centered on the bed. A man was stretched across its rumpled blankets, legs dangling off the near side, hatless head on the other. Sam recognized him at once. There was the white streaked hair, the heavy shoulders encased in one of those dark blue shirts Ty McCalley always affected. Sam blinked once as he saw the crimson splotch on one side of the head, the blot of blood on the blanket beside it. Somebody had shot and killed his best friend, his second father.

BUT Sam Hickson had no time to ponder on what Ty was doing there then. A slug ripped a shallow furrow in his left cheek, followed by the whiplash crack of a Colt. His dad's lessons in gunfighting came to his aid then. He threw himself sideways just inside the door, dropping to one knee simultaneously. The second slug passed over his head to one side. He picked out the figure of the hook-nosed Lobo Hobbs crouched over there by the battered chest of drawers.

There was no fear now in Sam Hickson. His ticket to Boothill would be punched. No question of that. But a cold calculating fury gripped him, the kind of fury his dad must have known when he cornered a killer on a manhunt. The Lobo had slain his friend, Ty. And you pay off a killer in

his own coin. He rode that trigger hard, saw splinters jump from the chest. Then there was a pain-torn curse from The Lobo. The tall slab-bodied man with those vicious crescent-shaped eyes half rose to sway away from the chest. He was hit in his upper left arm, the bone shattered. He reeled toward the open window.

But The Lobo had gunned his way out of many a tight before. He levelled his weapon. Then Careful Sam was spun out into the hall as a slug plowed a gash in the side of his head, just below his hat. Nausea gripped him so that he almost fell. Vaguely he was aware of shouting outside. Then he steadied himself and plunged back into the room. It was just in time to see The Lobo, over the window sill, hurtle himself toward the hummock close behind the store. The deputy triggered wildly twice, missing.

He rushed around the end of the bed and reached the window sill and thrust the upper part of his body outward just as The Lobo got to his feet on the hummock and started to run for the trees. Sam climbed out of the window and dropped. When he saw the deputy land, The Lobo turned coolly and drew bead on him. His first slug missed. Sam fired and missed too. He hit the trigger again and the firing pin hit an empty shell. He dug with his left hand for his second weapon. It wasn't there, flung out in his leap to the hummock.

The Lobo's cadaverous sallow face split in a wide cold grin. "*Adios,* you law dog!" he called softly as he took careful aim.

Sam flung his empty gun. It didn't hit The Lobo. But it made him duck away and hold his fire. Then Sam was on him, ripping the smoking weapon from the outlaw's hand as he grappled. The snaky Lobo twisted free, going for a knife in a sheathe slung under his shirt behind his neck, an old Mex trick. Sam bulled forward, head down. The Lobo landed on his back in the dew-wet grass, but bringing that blade sweeping around. The deputy grabbed the wrist of the knife hand, then bent to sink his teeth in it. The knife fell.

It was the one-time Careful Sam who snatched it up. Then he plunged it into The Lobo's chest. Wrestled the blade free and buried it again. He was starting another downward stroke when his arm was grabbed from behind. It was Sheriff Ron Tebbers. He pulled his deputy gently off the dead Lobo Hobbs.

"How many times you want to kill a man, son?" he asked. "We—we never knew he was going to be here," Tebbers went on jerkily, still stunned by what had happened. "It—it was a test. Ty McCalley was supposed—"

One of the house guards from Reilly's place came over. Then Tex Bane, another of Reilly's men, came trotting down the outside stairs.

"Ty's up there all right. Apparently The Lobo came in, found him there, and jumped him. Batted him down with a gun barrel blow. Ty's got a bad gash in his skull. But he's sitting up conscious now."

The keyed-up Sam Hickson—nobody would ever call him "Careful Sam" again —let out his breath with a great whoosh of relief. He was vaguely aware of the sheriff pumping his hand, saying something about how it was good to congratulate the hombre who'd be the next sheriff. Sam Hickson heard but that wasn't important.

What was important was that he'd become a full-fledged man now. And he realized at last his dad had been right. You pay a killer off in his own coin. He blinked into the first full flush of the sunlight. The shadow of repugnance for his dad, that had been like a shadow at the back of his mind for years, was dissipated.

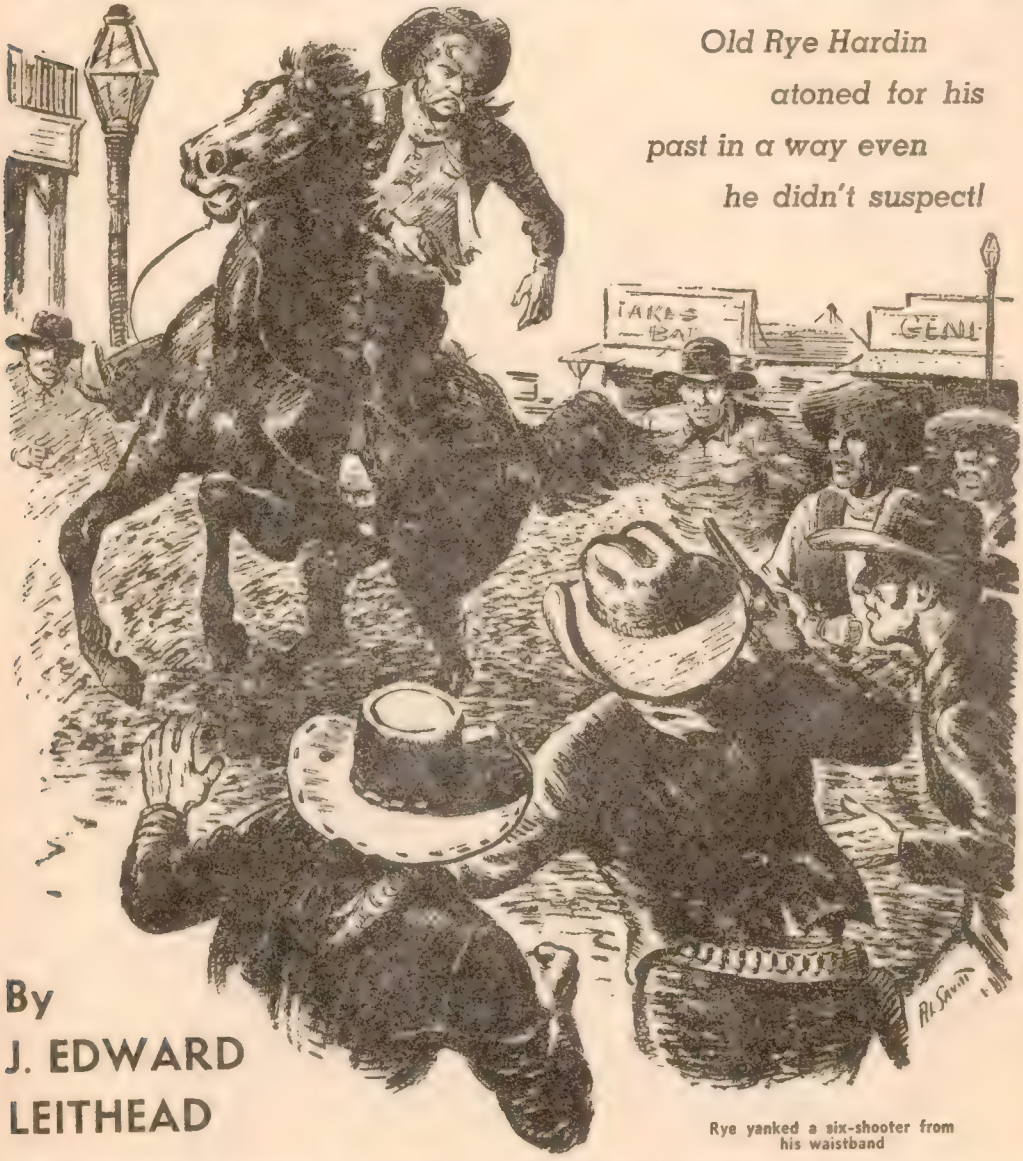
It had been a ticket to Boothill all right. But he had handed it to the other man. "I'm sorta — sorta hungry," he said hoarsely.

SCOURGE OF THE SAN SABA

A True Texas Ranger Story by HAROLD PREECE *Next Issue!*

No Lead Pills for Plowmen

Old Rye Hardin atoned for his past in a way even he didn't suspect!



Rye yanked a six-shooter from his waistband

By J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

OLD RYE HARDIN shot out of his porch chair spitting an oath, as the rickety wagon cleared the east pass and rolled down his private valley. It was a homesteader by the puddin'-foot team. They were good plow horses.

The Sandstone Valley was semi-desert range, fit for grazing a hardy breed of stock like Hardin's Rocker-H longhorns, but no region to encourage farmers to settle. Rye didn't actually own an acre of that arid lowland between the ramparts

of the Scorpion and Jackpine Mountains, but he'd got to thinking of it as his, and as being quite safe from clodbuster invasion.

He would never forget his last experience with homesteaders, though it had happened years ago, costing him much mental anguish and many dollars. His friends said that old Rye's heart was too big for his small but rawhide-tough body.

Rye picked at his scraggly beard, hard lights in his blue eyes as he watched the wagon's slow progress. He heard the tap of his foreman's boots as the latter turned the corner of the house, stepped onto the porch. Then Shan Tully let go with a blistering exclamation as he saw what the boss was looking at.

"I cussed, too, when I first sighted them, Shan," Rye said. "But, after all, what's the sense? They'll discover quick enough this ain't no plowman's paradise, and move on."

"I'm not so sure," retorted Tully, a slender, dark-faced man, who was no optimist. "I've seen them stick it out against all odds, hoping for a miracle of rain while their crops burned up in the sun, braving gun-smoke to hold fast to their little quarter-sections."

Rye's head turned on a sun-reddened neck. "It's born and bred in a man, that love of a home and the earth."

Tully snorted. "Well, I say plow-chasers was devil-spawned to make trouble for cattle-raisers. I'd suggest lighting a fire under that incoming party and maybe halt a flood of range-spoilers, only I know you wouldn't act on it."

"You're mighty right I wouldn't!" Rye's lips tightened. "I dealt myself enough misery, years back, shooting a stubborn clodbuster who started to fence in a piece of my range. You know the story, Shan. This Milroy fellow was young, and so was I, then. But he had a little family, a boy and a girl besides his wife. I was unmarried, like I am yet. He needed that land worse than I did. I shot him, not knowing he had no gun on him.

"When I learned about the wife and kids, left destitute after his death, I fixed it up with a lawyer to make regular payments to Mrs. Milroy till the youngsters had growed and could look after themselves," Hardin continued. "I didn't want them to know where the money was coming from, and I never heard that they found out. I pulled stakes on that range and my wanderings finally brought me to Sandstone Valley, where I figured I'd never see another clodbuster. But I figured wrong—"

HARDIN stopped at the sudden sardonic grin on Tully's lean face, jerked around to follow his pointing finger.

"Outfit's come to grief already, Rye!" Tully exclaimed. "Maybe that's a good sign, though I wouldn't bet on it!"

The little rancher stared at the distant wagon, which had halted, tilted to one side. The hard lights had melted from Rye's eyes. "Busted a wheel or an axle," he opined. "Suppose we ride up and look them over."

"And give them a hand if they need it, huh?" Tully said with heavy sarcasm. "You beat my time, Rye. But c'mon, if you're set on it."

They saddled and rode out from Rocker-H headquarters. A mile up the valley, the homesteaders were standing helplessly about the tilted wagon, its left hind wheel bent under, with a segment of the rim gone.

"Fellies of that there wheel been coming loose ever since we hit the roughs above the valley," announced the gaunt, flannel-shirted homesteader as the cattlemen drew rein. "I done a patching job, but it didn't hold. Ain't got the right tools."

His glance wavered on the horseback pair, for he recognized them as a breed never overly hospitable to his kind.

There were three of the newcomers, evidently husband, wife and daughter, and old Rye's roving gaze rested longest on the girl. Her slim prettiness was apparent in spite of travel-worn sunbonnet and calico. Lips curved in a smile at the grizzled little cowman, and Rye grinned back.

"Blacksmith shop at yonder ranch," Hardin said to the homesteader. "Take your wheel over and fix it up the best you can. But it looks to me like that crippled rig won't roll much farther."

At the friendly offer, the farmer beamed. "Was aiming to settle here, but not just at this spot. Heard there was only one cow outfit in the valley. If you'll tell me your name, mister, and where your range boundaries lie, I'll be careful to throw down outside 'em. Casper Blaine,

which is me, respects another's property rights and hones to be a good neighbor if he gets half a chance. The women folks are my missus and daughter, Diana."

Old Rye nodded, introduced himself. He had turned a little grim. "You'll find it tough going in this desert stretch, Blaine. Never enough rain. Too many sandstorms. All right for longhorn cattle, but no good for crops."

Blaine took off his battered hat and swung his gaze around the sun-drenched valley. "I'll gamble on it, Hardin. I can't do no worse than in other sections I've tried to farm." He added earnestly, "It'll mean a lot, not having to watch for hostile cowpokes driving stock through my cornfield or heaving a torch onto my barn roof."

As Hardin and Tully turned their mounts back toward the ranch, Shan broke a disgusted silence.

"If you'd just got tough with that clodbuster, I figure you could have scared him off, Rye. Once he's settled—"

"I warned him about the weather, didn't I?" Hardin interposed. "He'll find out how right I was if he stays long enough." His bearded lips twitched. "Sweet-looking kid, that Diana. Makes me regret a heap I never took time off from business to marry. I might've had a daughter like her."

Shan threw him a pitying glance. "Little late for them regrets, Rye. You might've had a son, and a hellion at that. Better be thinking what'll happen to our range when a locust horde of homesteaders lights on it. Where one of them takes root, others are sure to follow."

"Stop bellyaching, Shan!"

But in the summer months which followed, Rye had cause to remember Shan's prediction. Through the east pass trailed wagon after wagon, as if all the land-hungry within a thousand miles had got wind of the free range in Sandstone Valley. Heretofore, Rocker-H cattle had ranged far and wide, but Hardin was forced now to drive them in closer to his ranch and establish range lines.

His riders, particularly Shan Tully, urged him to fight. But Rye, although somewhat disquieted, threatened to fire the first man who took a crack at the homesteaders.

In the main they were peaceful, hard-working, and respected the boundaries he had set. Rye clung to the belief that one barren harvest would convince them toil and effort were useless in the Sandstone, and they'd quit and leave him once more in possession.

IT WAS a day late in August when Shan Tully tore into the ranchyard on a sweat-drenched horse and slammed through the doorway of Hardin's office. The oldster was working on his books. He glanced up as the foreman blared:

"Hope you're satisfied with showing a soft side to every land-grabbing son that drifts through the east pass! Now they're building a town on the edge of our south pasture!"

"Town?" repeated Rye slowly. Then his eyes opened wider and he came to his feet. "Who's building a town?"

"A fox-faced gent by the name of Rush Salter." Shan's features were working as he fanned himself with his hat. "While we're rounding up for the fall drive to Chuckwalla, we spy a string of wagons unloading on ground the clodbusters ain't so far gobbled up. Saloon-and-gambling equipment, store fixtures, stuff to start a right sizable town. Even houses in sections.

"I ask this Salter what's the idea," Tully went on grimly, "and he tells me, grinning in a way I'd like to smash him for, that such a big farming region needs a trading center and he's come to set it up. I tell him we've been pretty easy on the hoemen, but it don't follow we'll tolerate a hell-raising town smack-dab in the middle of the valley. By ranny, Rye, if that town outfit's allowed to settle and keep the homesteaders supplied when they run short of things, we'll never be rid of the pests!"

Old Rye reached for his gun-belt and buckled it on. He was a good shot with a six-gun, had never permitted himself to get rusty. Although homesteaders were definitely not on his gunning list, rustlers and other riffraff had found it costly to crowd little Rye Hardin.

"I'll have a wau-wau with Mr. Salter," he said, his boot heels clicking doorward.

Hardin got a horse at the corral. Tully hit saddle alongside him, grinning in anticipation of gunsmoke action long denied. All the hands were working a herd in the

south pasture, and would be on call if the boss really meant to start something.

As they neared the pasture, hazy with the dust of cattle being formed into the beef cut, Rye saw beyond, on a level stretch from which the greasewood and mesquite had been chopped away, a dozen or more portable buildings rising, section by section.

At Rye's appearance, crossing the pasture, cowhands left off chousing longhorns to fall in behind him and the foreman, sliding guns up and down in holsters to make sure the weapons would come out fast. Rye noticed their actions but didn't say anything.

Beside the work gangs setting up the town, there were a number of interested homesteaders looking on, among them Casper Blaine and his daughter, who were seated in the wagon with the patched-up wheel. Hardin, intent on meeting Salter, scarcely heeded the farmers at the moment.

Shan Tully suddenly leveled an arm, cried, "That's him, Rye!" and reined toward a structure where workmen were hanging a saloon sign under the direction of a tall man in a stiff-brimmed hat, white shirt and low-cut vest. He wore a shoulder holster, and his gaze flicked Rye as the little cowman slipped from the saddle.

Salter's face was narrow and pointed, his ears large, giving him that vulpine look Shan had spoken of. He uncovered his teeth in a smile as Rye came toward him, trailed by glowering Shan and the punchers. Several gun-toting men moved up behind Salter.

"You must be Rye Hardin," Salter said, amusement in his eyes as he looked Rye over from head to foot. "Had a little argument with your foreman and he said he'd fetch you. Got the notion you was seven foot tall, with horns."

Rye was a trifle sensitive about his size. "A bullet, Salter, is a little lead pill," he said evenly, "but it'll kill a man as dead as a cannonball! It ain't bigness so much as striking power that counts."

Salter began to suspect that here was neatly packaged dynamite. He said, "Anyway, let's not get off on the wrong foot. I want to start a trading center here, where it's obviously needed. We're not on your cattle range, and you don't own the valley. What's the objection?"

Rye didn't say that a supply center in the Sandstone would delay the exodus or unwanted homesteaders. He voiced another reason, just as good:

"If you ain't actually across my range line, you're squatting plumb against it. Too close for a man running cattle, because these little off-trail towns, far from any law but what we make ourselves, attract the scum of the badlands, and first thing we'd know we'd be fighting cow thieves."

SALTER shook his head. "Wouldn't be enough of that kind to give trouble. I aim to deal with the homesteaders."

"How would you bring in provisions to sell?" Rye asked. "I noticed the signs of a general store and a butchershop."

"Freight the stuff," Salter answered.

"Pretty expensive." Rye's eyes hardened. "Spite of your arguments, Salter, I won't—"

Voices distracted him then—Casper and Diana Blaine, approaching from the rear to stop beside the little cowman.

"We're in luck, Hardin, ain't we?" exclaimed the big homesteader. "If the crops fail this season, at least we'll be able to hold out and try again in the spring, what with a regular town and stores where we can buy whatever we need. There'll be a place to go evenings, when we ain't too drug out from farm work to ride in. Makes us feel grateful to Mr. Salter for spotting this valley."

Salter grinned at the stiff-lipped Hardin. "You see how your neighbors take to the plan, Mr. Cowman?"

Diana Blaine clasped Rye's left arm, looked into his smoldering eyes. "You don't seem pleased, Mr. Hardin. Maybe you feel you're being crowded. But won't a town close by be an advantage to you as well as to us? You have to travel eighty miles to Chuckwalla for supplies and everything. If you're sick or have an accident, need a doctor—"

"I never need a doctor!" Rye put in abruptly.

"I hope you never do," smiled Diana, "but if you should, it'd be handy having one within easy call. There's a doctor here already, looking for a place to hang out his shingle. I was talking to him a bit ago. He's a young man." Diana's eyes sparkled. "Quite handsome, too. Doctor

Martin Milroy."

Old Rye covered his amazement with a cough. Martin Milroy had been the name of the homesteader he had killed years back. This must be his son, who would now be about the right age to have graduated from medical college. What irony that he should be seeking to start a practice in the locality where his father's killer lived!

Hardin, deeply agitated, strove not to betray it. Though but a small boy when the elder Milroy stopped the cowman's straight-aimed bullet, young Martin's mother probably had told him about Rye Hardin. And a doctor's degree was no guarantee that the Milroy boy, grown to manhood, wasn't bent on avenging his father's death when he came face to face with his killer.

Rye had a sudden desire to get away fast and think things out. He patted Diana's hand, forcing a smile.

"Since you homesteaders want the town so bad, we'll give her a whirl and see how it goes."

"I'm sure you won't regret your decision, Mr. Hardin." Diana squeezed the sinewy arm before she let it go, wondering a little at Rye's haste in starting for his horse.

Not trusting himself to look at the grinning Salter or the scowling Rocker-H hands, Rye stepped up in the saddle. In angry silence his men mounted, to follow him back to the south pasture. Shan Tully caught up with his boss, was about to give vent to his feelings, when old Rye suddenly jerked his hatbrim low.

"There he is, Shan!" he muttered. "The young fellow in the new Stetson and gray suit, coming up the road. Looks so much like his pappy, it all comes back to me like it happened yesterday . . . Milroy hitting the sod on his face, dead before he struck, without firing a shot, because he had no gun. But I didn't know it till afterward."

Hardin spurred his horse. Tully flung a curious glance at the young doctor, who, in turn, was watching the cavalcade. Martin Milroy was of average height, well-built, his good looks apparent even at that distance. Not until they were back among the Rocker-H longhorns did Rye pull up. He sat saddle, staring at the ground, until Shan spoke sharply.

"What's fretting you so mighty, Rye?" Tully queried. "Say that young sawbones does find out who you are, do you aim to keep dodging him? If he's packing a grudge, make sure he's heeled and have it over with."

The other punchers looking grave, had ranged themselves in a semicircle. They'd never known the boss to show the white feather before.

"You don't understand, Shan," Rye said miserably. "That killing was a murder, a cold-blooded murder, the only one ever chalked against me. I didn't aim it to be that way, but I couldn't change the fact it was. Young Milroy, looking on me as his father's murderer, would be justified in throwing down on me. I don't want to be in a position where I'd have to shoot back to save myself. Can't you see, Shan?"

"Reckon I see your point, Rye, but I know what I'd do in your boots."

RYE WENT on, as if he hadn't heard. "Maybe it ain't just happenstance young Doc drifted into the valley, but the end of a long search for me." The little cowman sighed heavily. "He never laid eyes on me till today, but he'll learn quick enough who I am."

Tully emptied a cheek bulging with chewing tobacco. "Look, Rye. We thought sure you'd turn your wolf loose in that town Salter's setting up. But no, you let that Diana Blaine twist you round her little finger! Keep on like you're doing and you'll find yourself crowded out of the Sandstone. If I didn't know you had a backbone somewhere, I wouldn't wait for it to happen but ask for my time right now. Rest of the hands feel the same way. Better get hold of yourself, Rye."

Old Rye's glance swept the sober-faced riders. He reached out and laid his hand on Tully's shoulder. "You're all mighty loyal. It touches me. Don't worry too much about Salter and the homesteaders. The latter can't hold out against weather conditions forever, and Salter will close up shop the minute they're gone, if not sooner—being the kind of buzzard I know he is, fattening on poor folks. Just hold the deal, boys!"

They went back to cutting out beef cattle and Rye headed for the ranch.

It was opening night in Salter's town a

few days later, but none of the Rocker-H outfit attended, although free drinks were to be had and Salter sent them a special invitation. The Hardin riders were busy getting the trail herd ready to start the following dawn, but Rye wouldn't have gone anyway, wishing to avoid meeting Doctor Martin Milroy.

A cowboy had reported seeing the young medico shooting at a target back of the house where he had his office, and nobody could have convinced old Rye that Milroy wasn't perfecting his marksmanship to down him on sight. Half expecting the avenger to seek him at the Rocker H, Hardin was scarcely relieved when he didn't come. The little rancher realized they must inevitably meet, but he meant to put it off as long as possible.

The beef drive pointed north for Chuckwalla, a cowhand named Sawyer being left in charge of the ranch. Ten days passed before Rye and his men jogged back to the home ranch, expecting Sawyer to be on hand to greet them. He wasn't around the ranch buildings, but his saddled horse stood in the corral, with the gate open. It trotted out, whinnying, as if relieved to behold familiar beings.

Sharp-eyed Tully looked the bronc over, saying, "I opine that saddle ain't been off for a couple of days. Something's happened to Sawyer out on the range, and the horse hit for home!"

Rye's small figure tensed in the saddle. He shot a look at the ground near the corral gateway.

"Well, there's the hoofprints, going and coming," he pointed out. "Let's run the trail out."

While the sun westered, the jaded horseman rode over the range, peering for sign of the missing cowhand. They found Sawyer huddled at the bottom of an arroyo. It had taken several bullets to smash the life out of him. An empty Colt lay where it had fallen from rigid fingers.

He'd been dead a long time. Cattle and horse tracks around the arroyo rim told that hungry rustlers had taken advantage of the outfit's absence and Sawyer had caught them in the act.

Rye Hardin didn't say much, but there was a grim set to his lean jaw as he circled his horse, looking for the departing tracks of the cattle raiders. A mile of rock surface baffled him, but the suspicion which had been building up in his mind suddenly sent him galloping back to the arroyo.

"You boys take Sawyer home and bury him," he ordered. "I got an idea the trail ends at Salter's town. But I'll play a lone hand to make sure. I don't want you, Shan, or nobody!"

He reined the tired bronc around, worked his spurs. His men watched horse and rider blend with the lengthening shadows as the sun dropped behind the Scorpion peaks. Tully spoke, grinning:

"Not knowing what he'll run into down there, I ain't sure we ought to let him go alone. But it's pride as well as being mad that's driving old Rye. Wants to prove his backbone's in place again. Well, he don't have to—not to me!"

HARDIN reached Salter's town in twilight. He swung clear around it, hunting a possible hiding place for cattle in the vicinity before he turned his horse into the wide street. He hadn't sighted a single longhorn. If correct in what he was thinking, only a few Rocker-H cattle had been stolen and slaughtered immediately. But it was just the beginning.

He had forgotten Doctor Martin Milroy, until he passed a house with the doctor's sign at one side of the door. Rye hoped fervently the young medico wouldn't pop out and mix in this business. But with the killing of Sawyer fresh in his mind, not to mention the cattle theft, the little rancher was in no mood to turn back for anything.

Kerosene lamps, shining through windows, were laying a patchwork along both sides of the dirt street as Rye nimbly dismounted at the saloon. He walked in and faced a gathering of Salter's men and farmers, barked a question when he didn't see the boss. A bartender said Salter had stepped out awhile ago.

Rye turned on his heel. No use wasting time looking for Salter, he figured. Leaving his horse with the reins trailing, he directed his steps toward the butchershop.

A wagon with a patched-up wheel stood by the general store across the street, but Rye, in his haste, didn't notice it. He entered the dimly lighted shop, where a man in a bloodstained apron was getting ready to close up. The butcher had a thin face and a walrus mustache, and looked like one of the Conklin brothers who had taken

up a quarter-section.

"Yes," he said, answering Rye's query. "I'm Lot Conklin. Pete and me decided only one of us was needed to homestead that piece of land. I was a butcher before, so Salter hired me."

Hardin's keen eyes stabbed at the fresh-looking beef on the counter and hanging from hooks set in the back wall.

"Where'd you get your beef?" he asked sharply.

Conklin scratched an ear. "Some cow feller down south. I forget his name, but Mr. Salter can tell you."

"Delivered on the hoof?"

Conklin nodded, his pale eyes showing uneasiness.

"Who slaughtered the cattle? Where's the hides?" Rye stepped nearer, and Conklin, on the other side of the counter, sidled off as if expecting attack. "What you afraid of, Conklin? Just answer my questions."

"I didn't handle that end," Conklin said. "I only sell the meat."

"You're lying, Conklin!" Rye jerked his gun. "Talk, and talk fast! This here beef is from the Rocker-H, and you probably slaughtered it and burned or buried the hides. Maybe you even helped rustle it and pitched lead into my cowhand Sawyer! I'll have the truth out of you or—"

A light step sounded at the door, and a silvery laugh, cut short as the newcomer saw the sixshooter in Rye's hand.

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Hardin?" said a startled voice.

Rye threw a quick look at Diana Blaine, who was carrying a splint basket half filled with groceries.

"I wish you hadn't come in, Miss Diana," he said.

Then the little cowman caught a suspicious sound from Lot Conklin and ducked as he turned his head. A bullet grazed his jaw, thunked into the front wall. Rye unleashed a shot that spun the butcher against the back counter.

Conklin clutched a side of beef to steady himself, his eyes wild as he swung up his gunhand. He thumbed hammer three times, and Rye, triggering back at him, felt the bite of lead before the loose-jointed figure slid to the floor.

Rye heard men shouting outside, the pounding of feet. Salter's voice rose above the others.

"It's that little wart of a cowman! He's killed Lot Conklin! Let's smoke him down!"

Rye jumped for the door, saw shadowy forms in gun range of the butchershop. Too many to fight his way through. He slammed the door, bolted it, not observing the white-faced girl crouched against the side wall. Rye thought Diana had fled when the shooting started.

Wheeling, the little cowman shot out the lights, flung himself to the floor as a rain of bullets shattered the front window. Lying there, he reloaded his Colt and listened to the babel of voices. Pete Conklin, the dead butcher's brother, yelled for someone to fetch a log to batter down the door. A voice Rye didn't recognize cut sharply through the tumult:

"Who've you got cornered?"

"Rye Hardin, Doc," answered Salter. "That runty cattleman never liked our being here. Appears he's got around to cleaning us out, if he can. His men must be with him. We'll watch sharp for them."

"They'll be after the homesteaders next, unless we finish them tonight!" yammered Pete Conklin. "Always did figure Hardin's friendliness was a bluff!"

CAUTIOUSLY, old Rye had risen to his knees inside the store. "Doc," of course, was young Martin Milroy, and just then his voice sounded again:

"If Rye Hardin's in there, Salter, I'm taking a hand in this!"

Hardin groaned aloud, "Lordy, he would have to buy chips! I might stand them off behind that counter—" He heard someone stirring by the side wall and froze, tilting up his gun. "Who's that?"

"Diana, Mr. Hardin. I'm not used to gunfights and was scared stiff. I couldn't get out, for stray bullets were striking around the door."

"Golly, honey, this is no place for you! Stay where you're at, for they might send in another volley. I'll crawl toward you."

"From the talk out there, you're in a bad spot, Mr. Hardin," Diana said. "Is your horse nearby?"

"Up by the saloon, if they ain't moved it." He was creeping across the floor, saw the dim outline of the girl as she stood up.

"I don't know what it's all about, but I want to help you," Diana said rapidly. "I'm sure they'll hold fire when they know

I'm in here. While I've got their attention, you climb out that back window and head for your horse. The place isn't surrounded yet."

Rye groped for her hand. "I'll do that, honey, seeing I'm in a tight. And no matter what you hear, be sure old Rye's the one who's gotten a dirty deal. No time to explain now."

"I believe you. Lot Conklin tried to shoot you while your head was turned."

A log battering-ram struck the door and Salter yelled, "Have your smokers ready, men!"

Diana pushed Hardin toward the back of the store, rushed to the broken front window. A single, protesting voice outside was drowned in the clamor. Old Rye, as he raised the back window sash, thought for a moment the girl wouldn't be able to make herself heard. But her repeated cries brought a sudden lull in the assault on the bolted door.

"It's Diana Blaine!" someone shouted. "Wait a minute, fellows!"

Hardin dropped from the rear window and scuttled past the adjoining house before showing himself on the street. It was empty in the direction of the saloon, and he spied his horse where he had left it. In another moment he hit the saddle and lined out for the Rocker H.

Rye's cowhands were a relieved bunch when they saw him ride into the ranchyard. But what he had to tell them produced the effect of a bombshell dropped on the ranchhouse.

"See what happens when you try to be easy with folks?" growled Shan Tully. "Just gets you in a jam, Rye." He added acidly, "Surprised you broke your rule and killed Lot Conklin. He was a homesteader."

"Not when I downed him!" Rye defended his action. "He'd quit the plow to take up butchering—and rustling. Gave himself dead away with his jitteriness, drawing a gun when he saw I had him dead to rights. His brother Pete's the same no-account breed, and between Pete and Salter they stirred up a hornets' nest that was like to sting me to death if Diana Blaine hadn't been around."

"Well, what's the next move?" Shan asked sharply. "It's come to a showdown, Rye. Even you can savvy that."

"You bet—with Salter's crowd!" Rye snapped. "But not the homesteaders, if it can be side-stepped. I'm hoping they won't pay no mind to Pete Conklin, who still poses as one of them, though I'm sure rustling's his side line. Anyway, we'll set tight till morning."

TULLY discovered the lone rider coming toward the ranch, soon after breakfast. He called Rye and the others to the porch and they stood in expectant attitudes, until Diana Blaine rode up on a puddin'-foot plow horse. Her sunbonnet was thrown back, the sun glinted on her corn-gold hair, but her deadly serious expression marred an otherwise pleasing picture for the waiting rangemen.

"Something cooking at Salter's town?" old Rye asked calmly, helping her down.

Diana nodded. "I came to warn you, Mr. Hardin. Salter and his men are waiting for the homesteaders to join them in attacking your ranch. He claims you want to drive him out of the valley, that you started to do it last night but had to give up after being trapped in the butcher-shop."

"How's he explain the gunplay between Lot Conklin and me?"

"Well, I told what I'd seen, and Salter said you'd probably trumped-up some cattle-stealing business as an excuse to start a cleanup. Some folks seemed to believe him, specially when Pete Conklin chimed in, telling the homesteaders there they'd best throw in with Salter's crowd to wipe out Rocker H, or they'd be fighting you cowmen alone. Conklin got his horse and went to make the rounds of the farmers who weren't present.

"I drove home, told Dad about it," she went on. "He's for you, because you were kind to us from the first. He was up before dawn to ride from farm to farm, hoping he could persuade any who'd listened favorably to Conklin not to make a move. Dad said I'd better fetch word to you what was up. Of course, we don't know exactly what you—"

"I aim to give you full details," interrupted Rye, and he told her of the rustling and the violent passing of Sawyer. "Guess the rustlers didn't suspect I'd left a caretaker at the ranch and was a little careless. If they hadn't killed Sawyer, cattle thieving might've continued for sometime without my knowing it, though I was leery of

that town outfit. Likely the hides off them Rocker-H critters was destroyed, but I don't need them now as evidence."

"I should say not!" Diana was horrified. "That poor cowboy! And to think I urged you to let Salter stay!"

"Ain't blaming you, honey, only myself," Rye said grimly. "If we move fast, maybe we can smash Salter's gang before any of the homesteaders who feel so inclined can join up with the town bunch." Out of the corner of his eye Hardin saw his cowhands perk up, eager for a fight, He said, "How well do you know Doc Milroy, Diana?"

"I've talked to him several times," she replied, her face lighting up. "Why?"

Rye gave her a keen look. "Go to him and keep him out of the gunslinging. I reckon you can manage."

"I'll try," Diana promised, "but I'm sure he isn't the kind to take sides with crooks and murderers."

Rye winced, went on hurriedly, "There's about a score in Salter's crowd, plenty tough odds for my outfit. I figure it'd take the fighting edge off the rest if Salter himself was downed early. Pete Conklin, too, if he's back in town. There's something you can do, Diana, to help me get Salter the first shot. If they saw us coming in a bunch, the gang would fort up in the houses and knock us off like jackrabbits."

When she heard his plan, Diana was reluctant. Even Shan and the punchers objected, saying it was too big a risk for the boss to take.

But Rye said, "That's my worry. While they're looking me over, you boys get under cover, ready to blast them."

The little cowman had his way. An hour later he rode into Salter's town, a rope about his arms, no gun showing. Behind him came Diana on the plodding plow horse, her anxious face partly hidden by the sunbonnet, a sixshooter in her right hand.

"Looks like we're in time—no sign of the homesteaders," Rye said over his shoulder. "Don't forget about Doc Milroy."

Gun-hung men loitering in the street stared hard at the farm girl who apparently was bringing in Rye Hardin a prisoner. They raced to the saloon with the news and the fox-faced Salter came striding out. Other henchmen were at his back. One was Pete Conklin, scowling blackly and cursing.

The Rocker-H cowhands trailing Rye and Diana had dismounted before their dust could be spied from town and, splitting up, made fast tracks for the back lots.

Rye and the girl stopped in the middle of the street. Salter and Conklin reached them first, Salter shooting a curious look at Diana, while Pete seized the bridle of Hardin's horse.

"How'd you catch the little hellion, Miss Blaine?" said the town boss. "I thought last night you sort of defended him with your talk, but I must've been mistaken. Good girl! You stand by your own kind, probably saved a lot of homesteaders' lives by fetching him in."

Diana steadied her voice to reply. "That's why I did it. I met him alone up the trail—"

"What's the difference how she got him," Conklin broke in stridently. "He's here. Reckon you'd like us to take him off your hands, girl?"

She nodded. "Yes, if you won't hurt him."

"He killed my brother!" Conklin said fiercely. "Just ride on and we'll attend to him!"

DIANA, swallowing hard, prodded her horse into motion. She found it difficult to leave old Rye facing so many enemies, but as she drew away she saw young Doctor Milroy standing in his office doorway. The girl urged her horse to a faster pace.

Hardin was waiting impatiently for her to get out of six-gun range. He glared at the hostile faces fronting him.

"You look like a trapped wildcat, Hardin!" Salter snapped. "Sorry you nosed out that rustling? Ought to be. After we're through with you, and have polished off your outfit, we'll help ourselves to Rocker-H beef!"

"Cut out the gab, Rush!" growled Conklin. "Let's take him back of the saloon and give him his needin's!"

Conklin jerked the horse's bridle. The next instant he released it and reached for a gun, his eyes bugging out. Salter's eyes protruded, too, as he shot hand to shoulder holster. For the seemingly helpless Rye had flapped elbows outward, slipping off the loosely tied rope, and

yanked out the sixshooter stuck in his waistband, its cedar stock covered by buttoned vest.

He drilled Conklin between the eyes and the cow-stealing sodbuster buckled forward, the muzzle fire of his Colt scorching the ground. Rye's small figure rocked with bullet shock as he swiveled his shooting-iron. Salter had filled his hand, scored, while Conklin chinned the dust.

The stunned men behind Salter blocked his backward movement as Hardin shifted aim. They fired together. Rye felt lead strike again, but he saw Rush Salter's fox-like face screw up in agony and knew he'd tallied the town boss.

Hardin's head was buzzing, his horse seemed to glide out from under him. He hit the ground with the drone of bullets in his ears. Pushing upward on his left arm, he threw forward the gun that seemed suddenly so heavy. He dropped one of the men blazing at him over the still forms of Salter and Conklin, shot another off his legs.

He lost count of his bullets, slowly came to realize that no burst of flame followed his hammer-rocking. Lead still lashed at him. He turned dull eyes as boots thudded on the left. Someone flanking him . . . Slipping consciousness returned with a rush.

He had recognized young Doc Milroy, fisting a Colt, and the fury of his gaze seemed to be directed at Rye Hardin. The little cowman half raised the useless sixshooter, then lowered it. He thought that he shouted, but achieved only a hoarse vocal sound:

"Gun's empty, but go ahead and settle for your pappy! I've got it comin!"

Hardin stared, for the young medico, hatless and in his shirt sleeves, had dropped into a crouch nearby and was triggering out slugs at retreating forms—Rye's enemies. Gunsmoke belched from doorways they tried to enter. Some of the Rocker-H men were there to stop them. Shan and others had plunged into the street, shooting like mad, when Rye fell out of his saddle. But Doc Milroy had got to him first.

The firing thinned out and Milroy stood up, shoving gun into trousers band. He walked to Rye and stooped down.

"Game fight, oldster! Where are you hit?"

"Why," gasped Rye, "here and there. I reckon you hope it's fatal. You're Martin Milroy, Junior. I killed your pappy, a long time back."

"I know." Milroy passed deft fingers over Hardin's bullet-torn body. "Not so good, but you're tough and I'll do my best."

"You'll what?" exclaimed old Rye, then found himself being lifted and laid across Milroy's broad shoulder.

Hardin was lost in a wonderment so great he was scarcely aware of his tortured body. Before Milroy carried him through the office doorway, consciousness had fled.

THE YOUNG doctor's face appeared again to old Rye out of a smother of darkness. There were other faces there, that smiled when his eyes opened—Diana's, Shan Tully's, a lot more. But the strained, serious face of young Martin, so like his father's, stood out most clearly.

"I got the bullets out, Hardin," he said. "I think you'll make it."

Rye had difficulty with his tongue. Finally he forced out, "I wouldn't have believed you'd lift your hand except to put a bullet into me. Coals of fire, boy, coals of fire! But Heaven knows I repented that killing. Haunted me ever since!"

"I'm certain of that, Rye Hardin, after what you did to help mother raise my sister and me. Some of that money put me through medical college. Oh, yes, we found out who was sending it. For my part, Rye, the past is buried. I meant to look you up and tell you, but I was busy with sick homesteaders."

"When I learned you was target-practicing," said Rye, "I was sure you'd come to Sandstone to settle that score."

Milroy smiled slightly. "Just an accident I found you. As for that gun, I've carried it over a good many miles of prairie. I was brushing up because I didn't like the kind of men who were running the town, thought I'd have to use it some day."

"And so he did, Mr. Hardin." Diana pressed closer on the other side of the cot. "I kept my promise, but there was no holding Martin back when that gang had you down."

"Lucky for me," sighed Rye. "Now you understand why I didn't want him

in gun reach. I couldn't shoot it out with the boy."

"Told Diana I suspected the reason," said young Milroy. "Well, folks, I think he's talked enough for the present. He needs rest and sleep."

But Shan Tully lingered a moment when the young medico herded the others toward the door. The foreman laid a firm hand on one of Hardin's, outside the coverlet.

"Any orders, Rye? Salter gang's cleaned up, and the homesteaders won't fight. Want us to torch these shacks?"

Rye put some vigor into his headshake. "No, it'll be a ghost town soon enough. Homesteaders will have to quit before winter. No rain yet. If and when it comes it'll be too late. They'll see I was right about this desert country. Sorry to have young Milroy and Diana go, though."

"He could start a practice in Chuckwalla. They need a good sawbones at that shipping point."

Rye brightened. "I'll suggest it to him, Shan. And if he settles there, I wouldn't be surprised if I saw him *and* Diana Blaine every time I rode up. Only she'll have changed her last name. You notice they was calling each other 'Martin' and 'Diana'? That means something."

"Sure, sure!" Tully grinned and turned to go. "Behave yourself, Rye, and you'll probably be well in time for the wedding!"

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from Page 9)

a wobbly-legged spring lamb is worth more on the hoof than a beef steer was a few years back.

Cause and Effect

The upset in the sheep business also accounts for a much-advertised cosmetic ingredient that you didn't used to hear much about.

It's lanolin, a superfine tallow taken from the inside of fleeces, and which became a surplus supply when our domestic sheep were heavily slaughtered. This encouraged new and wider uses for lanolin. So now it's fashionable to rub it on your face, in your hair or any place else where your beauty needs improving.

Here's an item about dirty windshields, with another strange inside story of cause-and-effect in the world of living things. The lads at gas stations, who scrub the bug splatters off of automobile glass, will tell you that night-flying insects are getting more bothersome each year.

Why? Well, gals and galluses, here's my theory. Busy highways are death strips for crawling things—for snakes, lizards and all the reptile population that enjoy basking on the warm pavement.

These humble little critters feed on insects that reproduce themselves in various ways on plants and in the ground. When they're squashed and killed under truck and automobile wheels, then comes insect plagues. The bug-splattered windshields lead to accidents and more death on the highways—among the human species now.

Thus the strange cycle is completed, and the lowly lizard, toad and snake avenges itself against the killer, man.

The only winners seem to be carrion-crows, which pick up an easy living on dead reptiles and battered insects.

Play-Place Names

City folks that build vacation homes in the country try to outdo one another, I've noticed, in thinking up frivolous names for their play-places. Here are a few I've come onto lately:

Payment Downs, Rope's End, Costa Plenty, Nogota Rancho, La Snoozerita, Busted Flat and Bellyacres. A place, evidently owned by a dentist, is called Toothacres.

The gag-names for inns, such as Come Inn, Seldom Inn, All Inn and Done Inn are pretty much out of style lately, but desert retreats blossom out with abodes called El Blazo, Sunstroke Slope, Lizard Lane, Anthill Estates, Tumbleweed Terrace and Itching Palms.

It made me blink and look twice, when I was on the roam awhile back, to see a place with a big neon sign that said, "The Frontier Post."

It was a wayside eatery.

I pretty near walked in and took charge. Reckon I'd really o' been flabbergasted if it turned out that somebody named Starr was the owner, chief cook and bottlewasher.

The best eating-house sign I've seen lately

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was in that "dammed-est" section of Arizona. It said:

"NOT Recommended by Duncan Hines!"

Well, folks, that ends another get-together. I plumb hope you'll all be on hand at the Frontier Post in next issue of this TEXAS RANGERS Magazine. I'll be. But don't let me do all the palavering. If you've got questions or comments, fire 'em in by letter. No need to remind you that a stamped, self-addressed envelope will bring you a personal answer, *muy pronto*.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

A FEW strands of twisted wire, with sharp barbs protruding at regular intervals, probably had more to do with the settling of the West than the six-shooter. Barbed wire! It caused more blood to run than that shed from the scratches of cattle and other animals brushing against it. It was human blood that was shed, in great quantities, and not from the prick of the barbs, either. It was shed in the land wars between open-range ranchers and nesters who took advantage of the homestead act to settle the plains of the West and farm the land.

To protect their crops from the tens of thousands of cattle roaming the plains, the nesters fenced in their property. That was the beginning of the end of the Old West and the birth of the West as we know it today. But in that transition period, many lives were lost and homesteads abandoned before the big ranches, used to free range, finally realized that the days of open grazing were gone forever.

The use of barbed wire for fencing was originally brought about by the lack of timber on the millions of acres comprising the Great Plains. Farmers set themselves to find a way by which wire could be used without being destroyed by the animals it was intended to confine or, in reverse, keep out—and barbed wire was the answer.

The original patent for the wire was issued to Joseph F. Glidden of Dekalb, Illinois, in 1874, and during the same year a machine was devised to manufacture it. It was immediately successful for the reason that the barbs, while jabbing any animal rubbing the metal strands, would harm it but little. Thus the cattle would become aware of the sharp

barbs and stay away from it.

The farmer could grow his crops secure in the knowledge that at least he wouldn't lose them to foraging cattle.

The rancher operating large-scale on the heretofore open range and building a fortune with but little investment, didn't take this encroachment of civilization lying down. Although deep in his heart he knew that legally he was wrong, yet the acts he performed in attempts to scare the nesters away he tried to pass off as being morally right—for hadn't the plains been free pasture ever since the buffalo had thundered the prairies?

With fire in the night, with paid gunmen, with secret wire-clipping, he did his best to convince the honest nester that the West was not meant for sodbusters. Some few he drove off, others were murdered in cold blood, but the stamina and courage that had brought the emigrants west helped them when their backs were to the wall. And finally the rancher had to admit he was licked, legally and morally.

It was strange, then, that a situation arose wherein a rancher, and not a nester, built a fence around his property—not to keep cattle out but to keep nesters away from his property! And to keep them from using water that they had a legal right to use! This was vengeance in reverse.

Vengeance that seemed so strange that it aroused the curiosity of the Texas Rangers and brought famed Ranger Jim Hatfield to Sundust Valley. In LAND OF VIOLENT MEN, by Jackson Cole, in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, Hatfield was to see repeated the old, old story of the West—a bloody feud between the big ranchers on one side and the nesters and two-bit cattle-raisers on the other.

When Hatfield made a dry camp his first night in the Sundust Valley, he could see that drouth had walked the range. The long winter just passed had given little relief from the effects of smashing summer-long heat. The grass roots, here, had bathed in a different kind of moisture: human blood!

Northward, he noticed, there was water in plenty—the broad, shining wetness of the Sawdust River. Hatfield could see it flowing off there across the rolling miles in dusk-laden stillness. But he could see as well the faintly gleaming line of a sharp-fanged barricade that stood between that life-giving stream and a parched and thirsty land. Two-strand wire—barbed wire.

[Turn page]

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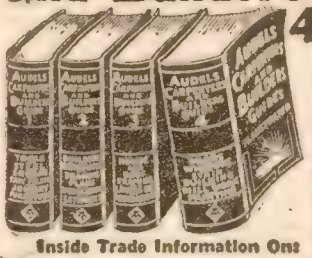

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The fences were going up across the once-open land of Texas. With them they had brought a bloody war! The Lone Wolf's mind was heavy with these thoughts, and with another grim Ranger mission that had called him here—for another Ranger had died here—Buck Norman—as good a man as had ever pinned the star-and-circle shield to his shirt-front. At least, it was almost certain that Buck was dead. The Lone Wolf thought so, as did his chief, Captain Bill McDowell. Only death could silence a Ranger, and there had been no report from Buck since he rode to Sundust two months ago. Part of Hatfield's job would be to trace him, to find some clue to his disappearance. And if Buck Norman had really been murdered, that meant Hatfield would be inviting death himself every moment he spent here. . . .

It was that night Jim saw the spectre of death, saved a young ranny from a hang-noose and learned a part of the situation he had to face. Young Welsh had been caught leading a gang of wire-cutters, and tough Virgil Massey, ramrod of the huge Triple C spread, owned by hard-bitten Clant Calder, wasted no time. He ordered a necktie party. Hatfield, observing from a distance and not knowing exactly what it was about, nevertheless wouldn't stand for a hanging. He rescued the young waddy from the jaws of death, and by doing so incurred the enmity of the vicious ramrod Massey. But it was worth it, just to get young Welsh's explanation of the situation.

Welsh told Hatfield that Calder owned the wired-in Triple C, that Massey did all his dirty work for him, but that actually all Calder held title to was a few sections of bottom land, including that on which his headquarters buildings were located. The rest of it was public graze. But that didn't stop Calder from putting barbed wire across it and keeping his neighbors away from the river flats and the precious water there. It was for that reason, Welsh continued, that the small-tally ranchers and nesters had banded together to destroy the fence.

In the beginning, that information was about all Hatfield had to go on, but before the end of the bloody struggle in LAND OF VIOLENT MEN he was to learn the true reason behind the barbed wire that closed off the mysterious Triple C Ranch from the rest of the land. For your own pleasure, look forward to this action-packed, gun-smoking novel of war between rancher and nester—

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Along with the Jim Hatfield novel, the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS will also carry its full quota of cracking stories of the West written just as you like them, plus interesting fact articles and departments. It's a package of reading pleasure from cover to cover! You'll enjoy every page of it!

OUR MAIL BAG

HI THERE, all you good folks who've been kind enough to write in to this office! Glad to be with you again and gander the lines you've penned or penciled on postcard and letter. It really gives us a thrill to sit here at ye editorial desk and know that readers all over the country—and sometimes other countries, too—take enough interest in what goes into TEXAS RANGERS to sit down and write their thoughts to us. Whether your reaction is good, bad or just indifferent to the magazine, be assured we take a heart anything you might say.

Now, for a few items out of the mail bag:

Captain Starr, I enjoy the "Frontier Post" indeed. I am a Texan, now in Los Angeles as so

[*Turn page*]

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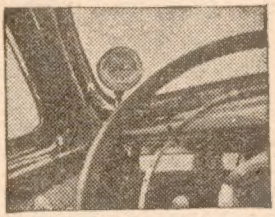

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many others. I know something about the West, but you know so much more and you really give information. And I thank you. I always read with pleasure and profit what you write. Thank you again.—*F. J. Monsen, Alhambra, California.*

I think that Jackson Cole knows how to write and that he has created a real sharp character in Jim Hatfield. I especially like Cole's descriptions of the great outdoors. And I'm plumb loco if I say that the cover paintings of *Texas Rangers* aren't works of art! All of which makes *Texas Rangers* the magazine for me.—*Stephen Silipigno, Boston, Mass.*

As a reader of *Texas Rangers* I like it fine, especially Jim Hatfield. Just keep on, Mr. Cole. I also like Long Sam Littlejohn. I'm getting on toward sixty years, but I love to read. So I look forward to the next issue.—*Mrs. Effie Lofton, Carmi, Illinois.*

I've been reading *Texas Rangers* for about five years now and I still think it's the best Western published. Hatfield should take Buck with him more often and teach him something about outdoor life, whenever Buck is with him. Some of the letter writers want Hatfield to be hard-hearted and have no feelings whatsoever.—*Pete Chirkot, Plymouth, Penna.*

I have just recently started reading *Texas Rangers* and it is the tops. "Guns of Mist River" was my first issue. Let's have more issues like "The Lobo Legion". It would be a swell idea to have Hatfield meet a fellow Ranger on a job. I also like the true stories of the Rangers, by Harold Preece.—*Kenneth Radloff, Juneau, Wisconsin.*

Captain Starr, I write to tell you how very much I appreciate your reports, which appear each month. Frankly, your letters are worth the tiny price of the magazine. I've lost my sight, almost totally blind, can't see to read a book or paper, but I have your articles read to me. I know you see lots of the beauty of Nature in your traveling. It must be very wonderful indeed to be able to travel ever so many lovely and beautiful places.—*Mrs. V. M. Mobley, Albany, Georgia.*

Well, there you are, folks. We'd like to print more of your correspondence, but unfortunately space allotment won't permit it. But believe us when we say that even if your cards and letters do not get printed, anything you have to say, or any criticism of the magazine, is taken into consideration just as much as those we print. So keep your thoughts a-rollin' into us, good readers, for we sure like to hear from you. Please address your mail to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. . . . Sorry, but that's about all for this issue. Many thanks for being with us—and we'll be with you again next month. *Adios!*

—THE EDITOR.

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